



THE MAGIC OF MISTLETOE

FROM DRUIDIC RITES TO
CHRISTMAS KISSES

SATURNALIA REVIVED A WALK WITH CHESTER'S WINTER WATCH
GOTHIC ROCKERS HOW THE DAMNED SPARKED A VAMPIRE PANIC
THE YEAR IN GHOSTS THE PHANTASMAL FASHIONS OF 2018

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GRIMM ORIGINS OF A
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SANTA AND HIS SAUCERS

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COVER: ART DIRECTORS & TRIP / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



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Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

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STRANGE DAYS

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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

OUT WITH THE OLD...

SEASON'S GREETINGS

Welcome to the last issue of 2018, in which we see out what for many people has been a somewhat difficult and divisive year with a seasonal selection of gentle fortean diversions: gingerbread houses, mistletoe myths, odd collections, fake royal trees, revived winter traditions, a Welsh water spirit and a slightly nastier folkloric entity lurking in Devon's River Ashburn... A Happy Christmas to all!

THE FTMB REBORN

Last issue we promised you an update – and hopefully some good news – about the fate of the Fortean Times Message Board (FTMB), the venerable online forum that grew out of the FT website and was for the best part of two decades an invaluable meeting place for readers, forteans and weird-watchers in general.

We're glad to say that the story, in this case, has a happy ending. Despite the ominous warning that Hallowe'en would see the shutting down of the FTMB, hard work continued behind the scenes, and a reprieve was granted to allow work to continue on building a new home for the site. In a pleasing bit of resurrection symbolism, the old Forum was laid to rest on Friday (9 November) and rose again on Sunday (11 November). Alleluia!

What is now called the Forteana Forums is open for business (as usual), so whether you're a stray one-time member in search of your old flock or a new reader looking for a friendly and welcoming community where you can discuss all things fortean, head over to the new site at: <https://forums.forteana.org/index.php>. If you need any help, you can email the superb mod team (whose efforts certainly saved the Forum) at: theforteanaforum@gmail.com.

COVER CONCERNS

One or two readers expressed concern that the cover illustration for last issue – a changeling child in an old-fashioned pram – bore a similarity to a poster designed by British artist Vic Fair for the 1974 horror film *It's Alive*, in which a woman gives birth to a demonic killer baby. FT would like to

reassure everyone concerned, including the late Mr Fair's widow and family, that any similarity between our cover and the poster was purely coincidental – due to the brief for the specific story being illustrated – and that there was no attempt to copy or adapt Mr Fair's original design.

XMAS ERRATA

Hopefully, this seasonal spread of slip-ups represents the last word on the errors of 2018; we of course look forward to further foul-ups in the New Year.

FT366:11: Richard Cameron of Ruslip spotted a particularly odd typo in the story about missing skier Constantinos Filippidis: "The item refers to a search 'with the aid of helicopters and K-9s', but sources I've read say a helicopter and search dogs."

FT370:63: A review of *Bodmin Booklet: Paranormal at Bodmin Jail* claimed that the "the grim

granite block-houses of Bodmin's Jail have loomed over the Devon town since the late 1700s." As Chris Aspin emailed to remind us: "Bodmin was in Cornwall when I lived there."

FT371:29: The final lines of the obituary for Dr William Dewi Rees were inadvertently left out, and should have read: "Dr William Dewi Rees, medical writer, born Barry, Glamorgan 9 Sept 1929; died 5 May 2018, aged 88."

FT372:12: Mike Jay spotted an Archaeology column erratum: the Iron Age fort exposed in Cornwall was in St Ive, a village and parish in eastern Cornwall, not St Ives.

FT372:46: Ben Radford's article on EVP mentions one C Maxwell Cede. This should be C Maxwell Cade. Thanks to Tom Ruffles for the correction.



PHOTO: MISTLETOE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS, STEVE MARSHALL

DAVID R SUTTON
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TO HOME



T-SHIRT



MUG



TEA TOWEL

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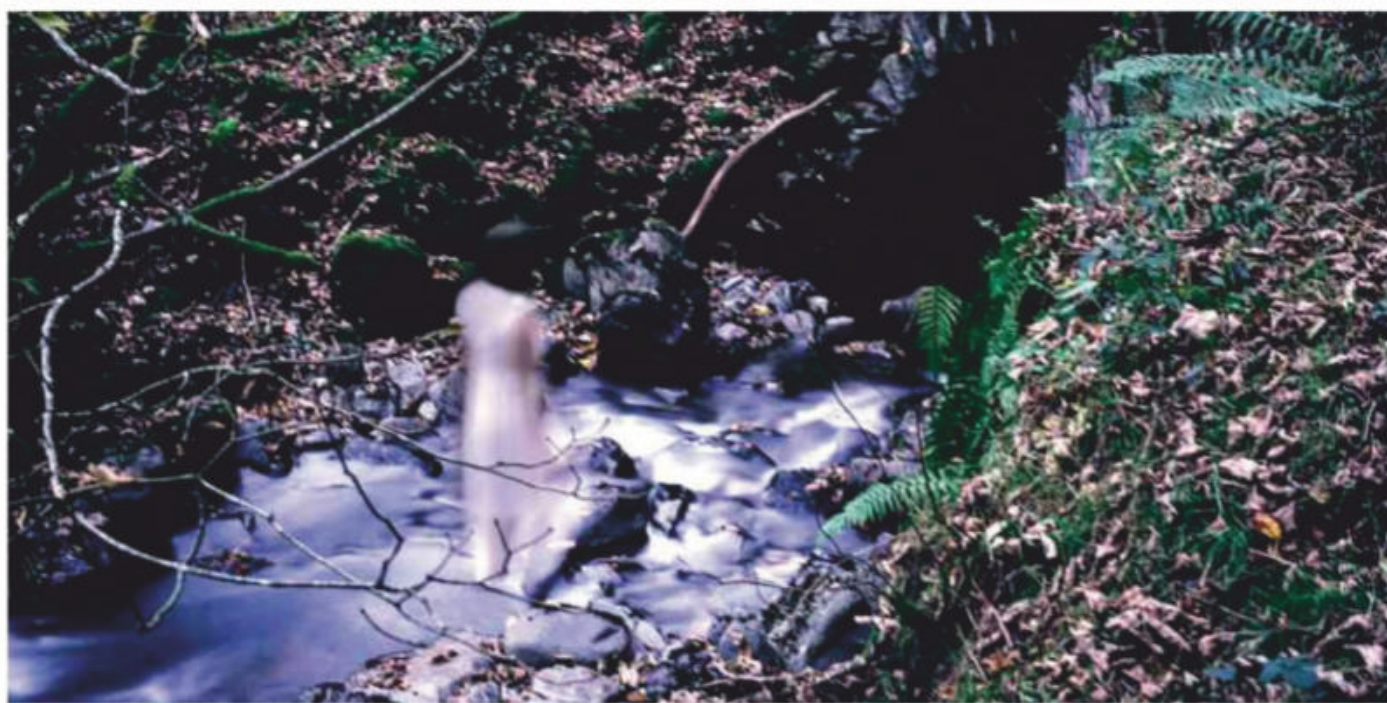


A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

WEIRDNESS FROM WALES

A water spirit photographed, a vampire staked and an evil polt summoned



DAVE NEWNHAM

ABOVE: The mysterious woman photographed by Dave Newnham on the River Ystwyth – is it a water spirit of local legend? **BELOW RIGHT:** The Damned's Dave Vanian says he caused a vampire panic in Monmouth back in 1980.

WELSH WATER SPIRIT

This photograph of a dark-haired woman dressed in white was taken in the River Ystwyth at Hafod Estate near Aberystwyth in mid-Wales at 6.15pm on 30 October. The photographer was Dave Newnham, the estate manager of Hafod Estate for the last 10 years, who was checking footpaths before heading home for the evening. "I saw a blurred shadow in the corner of my eye and spotted a woman standing in the river near Dologau Bridge," he said. "I shouted out to her as it was a cold night and I thought she might be in trouble, but it wasn't long before I realised she wasn't a person at all." He managed to take this photo before she seemed to disappear and merge into the river.

Some believe the figure resembles a water spirit from a local legend about the Three Sisters of Plynlimon, one version of which runs:

"High in the black mountains, on the windswept slopes of Mount Plynlimon, three sisters met to discuss the weighty problem of what was the best way to the sea – for, being water spirits, they were fond of the oceans. The first decided to take the direct route and headed westward. She became the river Ystwyth and was the first to mingle with salty waters. The second sister had a taste for landscape and made her way through purple hills and golden valleys – her name was Wye. The remaining sister decided against shortcuts and it took her 180 miles [290km] to reach the sea. The Severn, it appears, wished to visit all the fairest cities of the kingdom and never stray far from the haunts of men."

Residents are speculating that the image in the picture could be the water spirit of the River Ystwyth. *cambrian-news.co.uk*, 31 Oct; *Shropshire Star*, 1 Nov 2018.

ONE LESS VAMPIRE

Dave Vanian, star of punk band The Damned, has exploded a 38-year-old Welsh vampire legend by revealing he was the mysterious figure who made local headlines back in 1980. He was recording the band's *Black Album* at Rockfield Studios in Monmouth when he decided to step out for a breath of fresh air one moonlit night. "It was very chilly and I was wearing an ankle-length wool cloak to keep warm," he said. "I went for a walk to the local graveyard, which was, like, a mile down the road. I walked around and as I left and started heading back up the lane to the studio, I was caught in a Mini's headlights as I was coming out of the cemetery, and the car veered off the road almost and then screamed round the bend. The local newspapers,

the next few days, had a thing, where a woman claimed she had seen the ghost of a vampire coming out of the local cemetery. It became a big deal and I decided to say nothing. I became entrenched in a ghost story. I've become an urban legend down there. I guess the locals will read this and realise they've never had a vampire ghost haunting the cemetery." Vanian and his band are in the middle of a revival thanks to the success of their latest album *Evil Spirits*. *star-magazine.co.uk*, 27 Sept 2018.

TREDEGAR TERROR

Here's a chilling Welsh story that we didn't cover at the time. The Fry family of Tredegar in South Wales said they had been left battered and bruised by an evil 'incubus demon' – initially summoned by Ouija board – which preyed on them while they slept. "My wife goes to bed fine, doesn't feel anything in the night but when she wakes up she's in agony," said Keiron Fry, 32-year-old father of three. "I wake up the next day and say: 'I didn't do that. I would never beat my wife.'" The family's cats were left too frightened to go upstairs. Mr Fry called in a paranormal expert, for a £100 fee, after the phantom told his children: "I'm going to slit your parents' throats." Tracy Fry, 46, a full-time carer, said: "It's getting worse and worse and there's nothing we can do. It has affected our marriage because we have been rowing and fighting all the time about

the demon. It has been feeding off all the negative energy." Church of Wales vicar Johnathan Widdess visited the troubled house and said prayers to help the family. *Metro*, 2 July 2015.



IAN DICKSON / REDFERNS



THE YEAR IN GHOSTS

Haunted trees and the avian spirit of Amy

PAGE 16



KILLED BY BELIEF

Placebos, nocebos and voodoo death

PAGE 24



ART BELL SIGNS OFF

Remembering the king of weird talk radio

PAGE 26

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

Fake news, fake bombs, and a conspirasphere in which there's seemingly no one left without a partisan axe to grind. **NOEL ROONEY** surveys the extremely odd Cesar Sayoc saga.

ENERGETIC MATERIAL

The suspicious parcels allegedly sent by Cesar Sayoc to leading Democrats in the run-up to the mid-term elections have had a parallax effect on the warring tribes that, in these interesting times, constitute the political audience in the USA. This is not in itself a surprise, given the rise of 'tribal epistemology' (see **FT373:5**) and the now clearly partisan nature of the US media landscape. I searched in vain for any commentaries on the Sayoc saga that might offer a dispassionate, sceptical account of the affair; after all, it's an odd story in many respects, and the stridently partial reporting on both sides leaves plenty of holes and anomalies for the interested observer.

There is considerable fudge and confusion about the nature and efficacy of the "energetic devices" (as the wannabe bombs were described by Christopher Wary – there's a neat little instance of nominative determinism – the director of the FBI). Wary dismissed claims by some that the devices were fake bombs – a claim bolstered somewhat by the evidence that apparently none of the timers had alarms on them, so would be pretty difficult to set off – by indulging in some verbal acrobatics, explaining that the devices contained "energetic material that can become combustible when subjected to heat or friction".

You don't need to be an alt-right, foaming-at-the-mouth patriot to see that Mr Wary had in essence described a box of matches. Why would the director of the FBI make a (very) public statement that is so obviously factually fragile, in an atmosphere of political polarisation and jangling pre-election nerves? The PR works at Quantico were probably just having one of those headache and doughnut days, but surely someone at HQ noticed that, at best, Wary was offering more alphabetti for the conspiratorial spaghetti?

Then there is the possibly pyrotechnical protagonist, Mr Sayoc. He is described in the media as a homeless, ex-bankrupt, ex-pizza delivering, bodybuilding DJ, and roadie for a troupe of male strippers, among whom he used to include himself (his recent life choices were clearly straying into Elmore Leonard territory, and lend some weight to his family's claims that he has some unresolved mental health issues). He was also reported, by NBC, as having denied any involvement in the campaign, before clamming up and nodding towards his lawyer. Mr Wary, again, made some odd remarks about the kind of sentence Sayoc might be facing, coming up with the curiously precise figure of 48 years; but if, as Wary claimed, these were real IEDs, wouldn't he be looking at a string of concurrent life sentences? Sayoc is also, apparently, a right-wing wing-nut who only follows liberal posters on social media; that's conflicted, at the very least.

So all in all it's a very bloody odd story. If this had happened 10 years, or even five years, ago, someone with a keen eye for anomalies and no particular political axe to grind might have picked up on the glaring oddities and decided to subject them to objective, or at least creative, analysis. But either there is no one left in the Conspirasphere without an axe, or there is no space left in the conspiratorial ether for the kind of disinterested scepticism that makes *fortean* out of factional furore. If that's the case, it's not just sad, in a vague, nostalgic sort of way; it's dangerous, in a combustible way that Cesar Sayoc's pre-election parcels quite possibly weren't.

www.conspiracy.news/2018-10-29-is-maga-bomber-cesar-sayoc-a-patsy.html; www.conspiracy.news/2018-10-27-fbi-director-christopher-wray-is-lying-to-america-about-the-fake-pipe-bombs-yes-they-were-hoax-devices.html; www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/mother-mail-bomb-suspect-cesar-sayoc-says-not-how-i-n931476.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



FT'S FAVOURITE HEADLINES
FROM AROUND THE WORLD

ONE MILLION VIAGRA PILLS STOCKPILED IN UK OVER FEARS OF HARD BREXIT

D.Mirror, 18 Sept 2018.

Talking turkeys in New England

<i> 25 Nov 2016.

KITTEN SAVED FROM DUELLING SNAKES IN MID-AIR DOGFIGHT

(Queensland) Courier-Mail, 10 Sept 2018.

Barrister: my client is a trout

Sun on Sunday, 13 Dec 2015.

US FACES INVASION BY GIANT LIZARDS AFTER PETS ESCAPE FROM FLORIDA

D.Telegraph, 4 Aug 2018.

Swiss bank clones its chief economist so he need never miss a meeting

Irish Times, 20 July 2018.

THE TABLE TOP MUSEUM | Miniature cabinets of curiosities go on display for a day at a showcase for eccentric collections



PHOTOS: ETIENNE GILFILLAN

2018's Table Top Museum – the third such event – took place on Sunday 23 September at the Art Workers' Guild, Queen's Square, in London's Bloomsbury, bringing together a number of curious collections. ETIENNE GILFILLAN spoke to its curator, artist and collector Stephen Fowler.

What is the Table Top Museum?
It's an event curated by myself, illustrator George Hardie, and the Art Workers' Guild, an organisation established in 1884 by a group of British architects associated with the ideas of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement. It promoted the 'unity of all the arts', denying the distinction between fine and applied art. We see the event as a means for the Guild to get to know other people and their collections, and vice versa, and of course the visitors play an important part. Each participant is given a table on which to exhibit their 'museum'. It's a unique opportunity for a collector to share their area of interest and expertise with the public and fellow collectors.

What inspired the event?
One cold, wet Sunday afternoon in 1982 my Auntie Eileen and Uncle Harold took my family to a house in their small village, Withiel, near Bodmin, Cornwall. I'm not sure what the event was, but inside the large house was a room containing a long dining



table covered with a dark green velvet tablecloth. On the table were various exhibits, packed together in an orderly fashion. The owner, an eccentric old lady, talked about her collections, and especially about a Neolithic axe head. Next to this antiquity was a mid-century handbound book with a photograph of the exact same object. The experience has stayed with me ever since. I also remember a nature table at my junior school, displaying spider crab shells and other aquatic curiosities. Both of these 'tabletop museums' were very immediate and visceral in nature, unlike the exhibits behind glass in conventional museums.

What are some of the more unusual collections you've seen?
Gosh, there are so many! The ones that spring to mind are: mid-century New Forest carved wooden toys; butcher bags; hair

nets; stockings (modelled by the collector); found playing cards; plastic thimbles; British bricks (from local brickworks); ceramic cottages and castles; a small cryptozoology museum; and a mud collection. Then there's the Gay Doll Museum; the Found Shopping List Archive; 'Beards, Bonnets, Bicycles, and Bad Boys' (late 19th and early 20th century photographs); Architecture of the Garden of Eden; the Museum of Plastic Moustaches; Extracts from the CCPI Confidential Archives; the Pear-Ovum Museum, manned by the Seddon Twins; the Pataphysical Museum Archive; the Museum of Ashridge; and the Museum of Coastal Curiosities.

I noticed a Bigfoot cast on one of the tables – what's the story behind that?
The cast was given to the Horse Hospital's Roger Burton by Ronnie Long, at the time of

LEFT: Visitors to the 2018 Table Top Museum at the Art Workers' Guild in Bloomsbury. BELOW: William Fowler: The Rough Sea Postcard and Associated Ephemera Museum.

his Bigfoot painting exhibition (see FT360:6). It's an authentic plaster footprint taken during the Patterson/Gimlin Bluff Creek sighting. It nestles in with Burton's "items of protection and posing, relics and religion, voodoo and veterinary accoutrements".

One of your exhibitors is someone very closely linked to FT: Richard Adams. Tell us about his collection.

Richard was a graphic designer for *Fortean Times*, and a collaborator with other notable forteans such as Ken Campbell, Heathcote Williams and John Michell. Adams's background is the 1960s Underground press; he worked as a key designer for *Oz* magazine, for instance, and the complete run of the publication was exhibited that day.

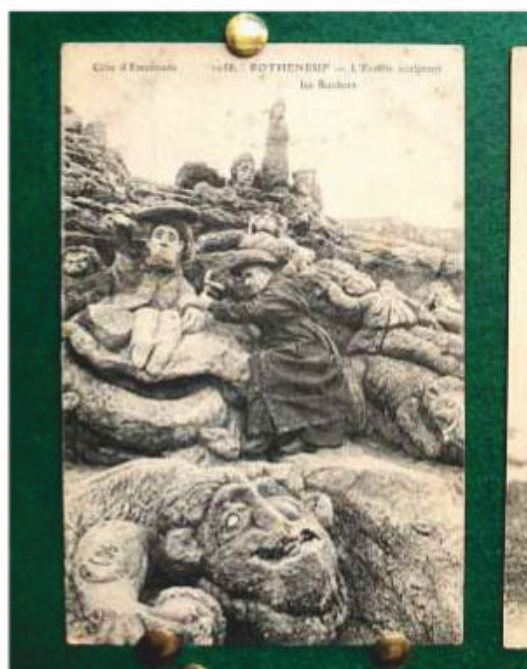
Is the Tabletop Museum something you're looking to expand or take on tour by doing it in other cities?

One or two organisations and museums have expressed an interest in staging the event alongside their permanent collections – it'll be interesting to see what juxtapositions occur.

Have you yourself ever exhibited a collection of objects... if not, what would it be?

I exhibited my large collection of vulcanised rubber stamps, consisting predominately of educational, utilitarian stamps. I'm building up the nerve to exhibit my own private cabinet of nature curiosities, initiated by my dad. Over time I've added fossils, flints, crabs, prawns and snail shells, and animal footprint plaster casts. I enjoy selecting the exhibitors and curating the Tabletop Museum day, pouring the tea and handing out prizes. My dad was a village Vicar, so perhaps it's in the blood...

For information on future events, visit www.artworkersguild.org



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Madeline Neave: The Antique Breadboard Museum; Roger Burton, Horse Hospital Archive: Bigfoot cast; Alistair Brotchie: Postcards of Amateurism; Claire Fletcher and Peter Quinell: Museum of Small Things; Alistair Brotchie: Postcards of outsider environments and buildings; Roger Burton, Horse Hospital Archive: Dried mango seed with Hindu face markings, India 1990s; Peter Quinell: A collection of mincers.



SIDELINES...

NOT THAT BRIGHT

Confronted by would-be armed robbers, Belgian shopkeeper Didier told them to come back later when there would be more money in the till. They complied, only to be arrested by waiting police officers. "I could tell I wasn't dealing with geniuses," said Didier, who sells e-cigarettes. *Times*, 24 Oct 2018.

HORSE HORROR

On 12 August, a horse's head was found in a bin bag dumped by a roadside in Hextable, Kent. A week later, on the other side of the country, a dead horse was found on a beach by Knott End Golf Club near Blackpool, with its head and hooves missing. We are not told if the Hextable head matched the Blackpool body. *Sun*, 13 Aug; *Blackpool Gazette*, 22 Aug 2018.

WRONG APERTURE

A naïve married couple from Bijie City in China, aged 26 and 24, who had been trying in vain for four years to have a baby, visited obstetrician Liu Hongmei for advice. The wife, who found intercourse "unusually painful", was found to be still a virgin. The couple had been practising anal sex. After being told the correct method, the wife conceived four months later. *Metro*, 24 Aug 2018.

FOUL-BEAKED BIRD

A multilingual Macaw called Jessie told firefighter Atinc Horoz to "f*** off" as he tried to rescue the parrot from a neighbour's roof in Cuckoo Hall Lane, Edmonton, north London, where she had been for three days. Jessie (who speaks Turkish, Greek and English) flew off and later returned home of her own accord. *BBC News*, *D.Mail*, 14 Aug 2018.



MARTIN ROSS

TALES OF SURVIVAL | Epics of endurance at sea and in the Siberian wilderness



CONSULATE GENERAL OF INDONESIA

● An Indonesian teenager survived 49 days on the ocean after his wooden hut was pushed out to sea by strong winds. Aldi Novel Adilang, 18, was plucked from the ocean by the cargo ship *Arpeggio* near the US territory of Guam in the western Pacific Ocean on 31 August. He had been working as a lamp keeper on a floating fish trap called a *rompong*, anchored to the seabed around 75 miles (120km) off the Indonesian coast, when unusually strong winds broke his mooring ropes on 19 July, sending the flimsy wooden hut adrift.

Aldi had been contracted to light lamps around the *rompong* to attract and trap fish, and had only a walkie-talkie for company. His only contact with another human being was once a week when someone would come to harvest the caught fish and give him a fresh batch of food, fuel, drinking water and other supplies. Despite lacking paddles or sails and only equipped with a week's worth of supplies (or a month's worth, according to the *Guardian*), Aldi was able to survive for seven weeks, drifting about 1,500 miles (2,400km). He ate fish caught from the ocean, said Mirza Nurhidayat, the Indonesian consul-general who oversaw his return home, adding: "After he ran out of cooking gas, he burned the *rompong*'s wooden fences to

make a fire for cooking."

More than 10 ships had failed to notice him before the *Arpeggio* picked up his emergency radio signal. At times, he considered ending his life by jumping into the ocean, but believed his Christian faith kept him alive, saying he prayed and read the Bible during his ordeal. He worked his way through the books of Matthew, John, Isaiah, Genesis and Psalms, with Matthew 6:9 – the opening of the Lord's Prayer – sticking in his mind. Lacking compass, GPS or lifejacket, he had no idea where he was, or how long he might be there. One of the worst parts of the ordeal – scarier than

the sharks that regularly circled the hut – was when he ran out of drinking water. He survived by sucking seawater through his shirt in a desperate attempt to reduce the salt he consumed. He did that for four days, until it

rained. That saw him through until he was rescued. After a week on board the *Arpeggio*, Aldi was dropped off at the vessel's next port of call, Osaka in Japan, where he was met by Indonesian consular officials. On 8 September, after a stay in hospital, he returned to his family home near Manado, in Indonesia's North Sulawesi province. He turned 19 on 30 September. *The Week*, 24 Sept; *D.Telegraph*, *D.Mail*, 25 Sept; *Guardian*, 29 Sept 2018.



LEFT: Aldi Novel Adilang photographed by his rescuers while adrift on his floating fishing trap. BELOW: Victor Vinogradov was lost for three weeks.

● Viktor Vinogradov, 65, survived three weeks in the freezing Siberian wilderness when he left the family summer house in the Krasnoyarsk region to go mushroom-picking with his dog Thor. When he failed to return, the local authorities and more than 200 volunteers scoured miles of forest, but found no trace of either man or dog.

Four days after his distraught daughter Tatiana told news services that the search had been abandoned, Mr Vinogradov phoned home. He was alive, if a lot thinner, and waiting for his family near the village of Kuskun, more than 12 miles (20km) from where he'd set off. Tatiana said they had lived off rowanberries, and collected drinking water from forest streams. "Dad hunted mice and cooked them over a fire for the dog. Later they found a hunter's hut and a half-bottle of cooking oil, which they rationed out between them. It was enough to keep their strength up."

Mr Vinogradov said he and Thor had got lost after heading back into the woods to avoid a bear and her cub – not an uncommon sight in Siberia. Weeks later, he heard the sounds of forestry workers nearby and rushed out to ask whether he could use their mobile phone to contact his family. *BBC News*, 25 Oct 2018.





CRITTER CORNER | Snakey surprise in a Virginia garden and Brisbane's bizarre 'biohazard'



TOP: The rare two-headed copperhead found in a Virginia garden. BELOW: The crucified bat seized by staff at Brisbane Airport.

TWO-HEADED VIPER

On 16 September a woman found a rare two-headed copperhead snake in her flowerbed in Woodbridge, Northern Virginia. The venomous snake was being cared for by an experienced viper keeper, with the hope that it would one day be put on display at a zoo. JD Kleopfer, a reptiles and amphibians specialist for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, said snakes with such a mutation find it difficult to survive in the wild, partly because the two heads often want to do "two different things". This particular snake was about two weeks old and 6in (15cm) long. "We were able to determine that the left head has the dominant oesophagus and the right head has the more developed throat for eating," Kleopfer said. The two heads share one heart and one set of lungs. Copperheads often grow to 18-36in (46-91cm) in length. While they are not known for being aggressive, they do sometimes attack humans when disturbed – but this "little guy" probably wasn't much of a danger and would mainly be attacking insects. *usatoday.com*, *WTVR (Virginia) via aol.com*, 21 Sept 2018.

CRUCIFIED BAT

Last year, staff at Brisbane Airport in Australia seized 35,000 dangerous goods from overseas passengers. The biohazards included skinned bats, snakes, cow dung, giant snails and beetles – all a threat to Queensland farmers and produce. Across Australia, other seizures included duck tongues, chicken feet, barbecued rat, lizard's feet and skinned frogs. One of the most memorable (though perhaps not a biohazard) was this crucified bat. (*Queensland) Courier-Mail*, 21 Mar 2018.



SIDELINES...

IMPERSONATING A GHOST

Roy Meadwell, 51, from Yeovil, Somerset, attempting to win back his ex-fiancée Kay Wimbury (whom he had assaulted in December 2016), sent her a letter pretending to be the ghost of her mother. The letter told her she had made a "terrible mistake", adding: "All you have to do is call him". He had breached a restraining order and was sentenced to four months in prison, suspended for two years. *BBC News*, *dailymail.co.uk*, 21 Aug 2018.

A BIT TOO NATURAL

Steve Bell, 49, had already eaten half of Nature's Pick Bistro Salad, purchased from Aldi in Kirkcaldy, Fife, when he found a dead baby crow. "That's the last time I go for the healthy option," he said. *Sun*, 30 July 2018.

SOLD A PUP

A variation on the Mexican Pet foaftale. A family in Kunming, Yunnan province, China, bought a Tibetan Mastiff puppy – or so they believed. It liked eating fruit and noodles, and after two years had grown to 250lb (113kg) and began walking on its hind legs. It was a bear, and is now being cared for at the Yunnan Wildlife Rescue Centre. *Picture (Australian magazine)*, 18 June 2018.

SURFEIT OF VERDI

Eva N played Plácido Domingo singing a four-minute aria from Verdi's 'La Traviata', in her house with speakers on full blast – non-stop, from morning till night, for 16 years. The homeowner, in Sturovo, Slovakia, began playing it to drown out a neighbour's barking dog, and had simply continued doing it. Finally, her neighbours had enough. She was arrested on 6 August, and faced charges of harassment and malicious persecution. *BBC News*, 9 Aug 2018.

BIRD NAVIGATION SOLVED

Scientists believe they have discovered how some birds manage to navigate thousands of miles during annual migrations. A study of Eurasian reed warblers found that they can measure the variation between magnetic and true north, and are thus able to correct their flight path. By contrast, Scopoli's shearwaters' sense of smell was found to play an important role in their ability to find their way home. *D.Mail*, 18 Aug, 29 Aug 2017.



SIDELINES...

FELINE GIFT

Bex Cox found a live goldfish on her kitchen floor in Bristol and quickly put it in a saucepan of water. Her cat Thor was sitting next to the fish, and had presumably deposited it there, unharmed. Thor had never brought any other creature home before. *Bristol Post*, 6 Mar 2018.

DINGHY PIRATES

Two thieves in an inflatable dinghy stole a fisherman's haul of Dover sole and plaice after holding him at knifepoint. His boat was just off Slapton Sands in Devon when the piratical pair launched their attack. They cut his nets and made off with his catch. *D.Telegraph*, 25 June 2018.

LOTTO LUCK 1

An Australian punter from the Sydney suburb of Bondi won two major lottery prizes in the same week. He scooped A\$1,020,487 (£566,717) on Monday, and then another A\$1,457,834 (£809,594) on Saturday. He said he would be investing in property, buying a car, and "a holiday in Honolulu goes without saying". *D.Mail*, 15 May 2018.

LOTTO LUCK 2

And in France, a man who regularly plays the lottery using the same numbers each time won €1 million twice in 18 months, at odds said to be 16 trillion to one. *Dundee Courier & Advertiser*, 8 June 2018.

"POCKET FIRE" WARNING

Barclays Bank customers in West Yorkshire received a latter warning them their debit cards could spontaneously "catch fire", and telling them to post the cards with PIN numbers to an address in India as part of "an urgent recall". The letter claimed the problem is due to a fault at a factory in "Molton Keynes". *BBC News*, 15 Aug 2018.

FARM OF THE DEAD

When RSPCA officials raided Maxine Cammock's farm in Dyke, Lincolnshire, they found 176 dead animals – dogs, ducks, geese, goats, sheep, chicks, turkeys and a cat. Cammock, 54, had stuffed 50 dead birds into an old freezer. The corpse of a pig that had eaten rat poison was locked in a shed. Nine pigs, a goose, chicken, goat, and 13 dogs were rehomed. *Sun*, 12 July 2018.

BIG CAT UPDATE

Mystery moggies from Burton upon Trent to Bournemouth and beyond



GLEN MINIKIN

ABOVE: The "enormous" cat photographed by Roy Jackson on a wall in his driveway: "It was definitely not a domestic cat."

- Roy Jackson, 73, a retired civil engineer, lives in Gatebeck Lane, South Lakeland, near Endmoor in Westmorland. On the evening of 11 September, he was walking his Labrador puppy down his driveway when his torch caught a large cat sitting on a wall, staring back at him. After about 10 seconds it slid down the wall into the darkness. "It was enormous," he said. "It was about 3ft 6in to 4ft [107-122cm] long and it had a curved tail which was about 18in [46cm] long. I shone my torch right at it and picked out its eyes, which were green, and about the size of an old penny. I called for my wife, Judith, but she had gone back into the house. I was apprehensive because it was less than 30 metres [98ft] away. It was definitely not a domestic cat." About four months earlier, an estate agent friend had seen a large black cat on his driveway as she was heading home; and the previous winter, he and his son-in-law, Seb Morgan, took video footage of some large paw prints in the snow, the size of a man's hand. In 2002 Christine Dodgson saw an "absolutely jet black" creature in a silage field from the bathroom of her home

"Its eyes were green, and the size of an old penny..."

in Natland, while a woman and her 10-year-old son claimed to have seen a large black cat moving from gorse bush to gorse bush as it stalked rabbits near Oxenholme. In January that year, Chris Martin encountered a puma-like creature on Burton Road close to the turn-off to Oxenholme. The *Westmorland Gazette* also reported ABC (anomalous big cats) sightings from Kendal,Sizergh, Levens, Holme, Winster, Sedbergh, Brigsteer and Witherslack – and a spate of sightings in the Lake District early in 2017.

Two days after his sighting, Roy Jackson set up an infrared motion-activated camera and caught the image shown above. Judging from a 6ft (1.8m) water trough (visible at left), and taking into account "a bit of perspective", he reckoned the cat (variously dubbed "the Beast

of Cumbria" or "the Beast of Kendall") was 3ft 9in (114cm) long. *Westmorland Gazette*, 20+27 Sept; *D.Mirror*, *D.Express*, 29 Sept 2018.

- On 4 July, David Geddon, 72, driving between Trentishoe and Heddon's Heath on Exmoor, saw an ABC. "It was the size of a large Labrador, possibly bigger," he said. "It jumped onto a wall about five yards in front of me. The way it moved was just like a cat. Its tail was about 2ft [60cm] long and very thick, a constant width from start to finish. It was a brown, greyish colour with slightly lighter, almost green, flecks or spots. It was only there for an instant before it jumped over the wall." He stopped the car in the middle of the road and ran to the wall. "It looked like it had run off into the thick bracken," he said. "I've been on safari in Africa and seen a leopard from a distance, and this animal was very similar in its characteristics." *North Devon Journal*, 26 July 2018.

- In July, a retired English teacher, named only as Joanna, saw a big cat in the grounds of The Dower House, Stoke Park,



as her husband drove along the M32 towards their Chichester home after a weekend in Bristol. “It was black or dark in colour, smaller than a horse but bigger than a big dog,” she said. “It was in the field below the house and was standing still with its head down as if it was eating or sniffing something. It had a long, thick outstretched tail. This was at about 9.30pm, early dusk, but I saw it clearly. I couldn’t think what animal it could be except for a big cat. It was the way it was using its tail to balance.” After a Google search she said the animal looked exactly like a big cat filmed by Coryn Memory near Stroud, and believes it could be the same animal. At the end of June, campers staying between Coleford and Symonds Yat in the Forest of Dean were chased by a growling big cat after they strayed into its territory in the middle of the night. *Bristol Live*, 17 July 2018.

- Police dog handlers were called out in late July after Darren Jenner saw an ABC climb into a tree in a suburb of Bournemouth in Dorset. A similar animal had been seen in a nearby garden a month earlier. “It wasn’t a domestic cat,” said Jenner. “It was huge, with a big head and a tail nearly as long as its body.” The police failed to find it. *D.Mirror*, 27 July 2018.

- In early September, a radio station in Cork, Ireland, received calls about ‘puma’ sightings in the Fountainstown/Crosshaven areas of Cork, while CSPCA, a local animal welfare group, said they had received six credible sightings between 29 August and 6 September. However, gardai said that they had received no recent ABC reports in county Cork, despite the growing rumours. *irishexaminer.com*, 7 Sept; *Irish Times*, 10 Sept 2018.

- Three horses and two dogs found dead in Tompkinsville, Monroe County, Kentucky, USA, on 2 September were possibly killed by a “large cat,” according to the sheriff’s department. *foxnews.com*, 5 Sept 2018.

- On 19 October, police in Scotland scrambled a helicopter and searched two Ayrshire



villages in pursuit of an ABC said to have been seen in the area. The operation followed a call and photographs from a member of the public who reported seeing a “black panther”, which (s)he said appeared to be injured, in fields beside the B730 near Drongan, a former mining village, at 8.45am. Residents of Drongan and nearby Coalhall were told to be vigilant and not to approach the animal if they saw it. A police source said the photographs were “quite far away and not much use,” but proved the sighting was not just a hoax. The police then announced that following enquiries the animal was thought to be a large domestic cat. It is unclear how convincing this conclusion was; matters were muddled by Robert Brown, 18, who made a big cat silhouette from metal, using a laser cutter, before posting photographs on social media. In 2009 an ABC was seen outside a post office in Sorn, 11 miles (18km) northeast of Drongan. Weeks later, a puma was said to have attacked a pony four miles (6km) west of the village. *Times*, *Scottish Sun*, *D.Mail*, 20 Oct 2018.

- One night in February 2017, wildlife enthusiast Steve Morgan, 63, was driving back to his home in Burton upon Trent, East Staffordshire, from a fishing trip. At around 1am, he was driving along Main Street in Tatenhill when he saw a large black cat walking along the pavement in front of him. It was “bigger than a Labrador” and had a long slim tail and muscular haunches. He drove alongside the animal at a distance of 10ft (3m), until it turned into bushes near the Church of St Michael and All

LEFT: Bournemouth wildlife expert Jonathan McGowan says that several big cats are reported in Dorset every week.

Angels. “I nearly drove off the road in shock,” he said. “I slowed down so that I could keep pace with it. It seemed to take little notice and, travelling at about 10mph, I kept it company for more than 150 yards through the village. I could see it very clearly and it was definitely a cat. Eventually it turned off the pavement and disappeared by the church... The head was a little on the small side for a jaguar or leopard and the lithe, leggy appearance is strongly suggestive of a puma.” He kept quiet about his sighting, assuming he would not be believed; but changed his mind following the claim by Tim Statham, 53, to have seen a ‘puma’ near Queen’s Hospital in Tatenhill on 7 August. *Sunday Mercury*, 2 Sept 2018.

- At around 8.30pm on 6 November, Chris Colledge saw an ABC on his patio in Bournemouth, Dorset, after it prompted his security light to turn on. “It was definitely a panther,” he said. “I live on the West Cliff overlooking the green and it came over the fence and onto the patio and over the bushes. It was the size of a middle-sized dog, all black, totally black and definitely had the tail of a panther or a puma. It wasn’t a dog or a cat’s tail. The way it moved it was definitely a panther or of that breed.”

There had been previous sightings in the Westbourne area. In July, police sent a dog unit to Brunstead Road after Darren Jenner said he saw a big cat walk down the road before climbing into a tree. A month earlier, in the garden of a nearby property, Rachael Mould took pictures and a video of (possibly) the same creature. In September, Bournemouth wildlife expert Jonathan McGowan said that every week there are “several” big cat sightings in Dorset including leopards, pumas and lynx. (*Bournemouth*) *Daily Echo*, 9 Nov 2018.

For our last ABC round-up, see FT369:10-11.

SIDELINES...

FAULTY MOMENT

On 18 July, bystanders in Cannington, Western Australia, helped police restrain a man who was attacking his own car with a golf club and a chainsaw. The 27-year-old from Beckenham, near Perth, continued to kick out after being handcuffed, and he was hospitalised for assessment. (*Sydney*) *D.Telegraph*, 21 July 2018.

NETTLE CHAMPION

Phil Thorne reclaimed his title in the World Nettle Eating Championships in Bottle Inn, Marshwood, Dorset, by chomping through 104ft (323m) of stinging nettles in an hour, one 2ft (60cm) stalk at a time, to beat his personal best of 96ft (29m). About 400 people attended this year to see 2014 and 2016 champ Mr Thorne regain his crown. *Metro*, 17 July 2018.

SEAL BITES SWIMMER

A swimmer was bitten by a seal in what is believed to be the first such attack in British waters. The man was in Mill Bay Cove near Dartmouth when the seal tugged at his leg and thrashed against his back. It then breached the surface, stared him in the eye, and sank its teeth into his thigh, turning the water red with blood. It was thought to be protecting its pups. *D.Mail*, 20 July 2018.

FLAVOUR FOR FIGHTING

The SOE (Special Operations Executive) smuggled out sacks of garlic from France under the noses of the Nazis after Free French forces said, “We can’t fight without it.” Operation Achilles was mounted in 1942 to satisfy the taste buds of 300 French sailors based on the Isle of Wight. Britain now consumes more garlic than the French – 40,000 tons per annum – mostly grown on the Isle of Wight. *Sunday Express*, 29 July 2018.





SIDELINES...

NEW ARRIVAL

In late August, as millions of spiders invaded British homes in search of females, a *Sibianor laræ* spider, which can jump to a height of 6ft (1.8m), was spotted in the UK for the first time – in Cheshire. *D.Star*, 31 Aug 2018.

CANINE BOOTEES

In July, police in Zurich urged the public to buy shoes for their dogs, to protect their paws from hot pavements and asphalt. Switzerland was having one of the hottest summers since records began in 1864, with temperatures around 30°C (86°F). *BBC News*, 2 Aug 2018.

GOLFING MIRACLE

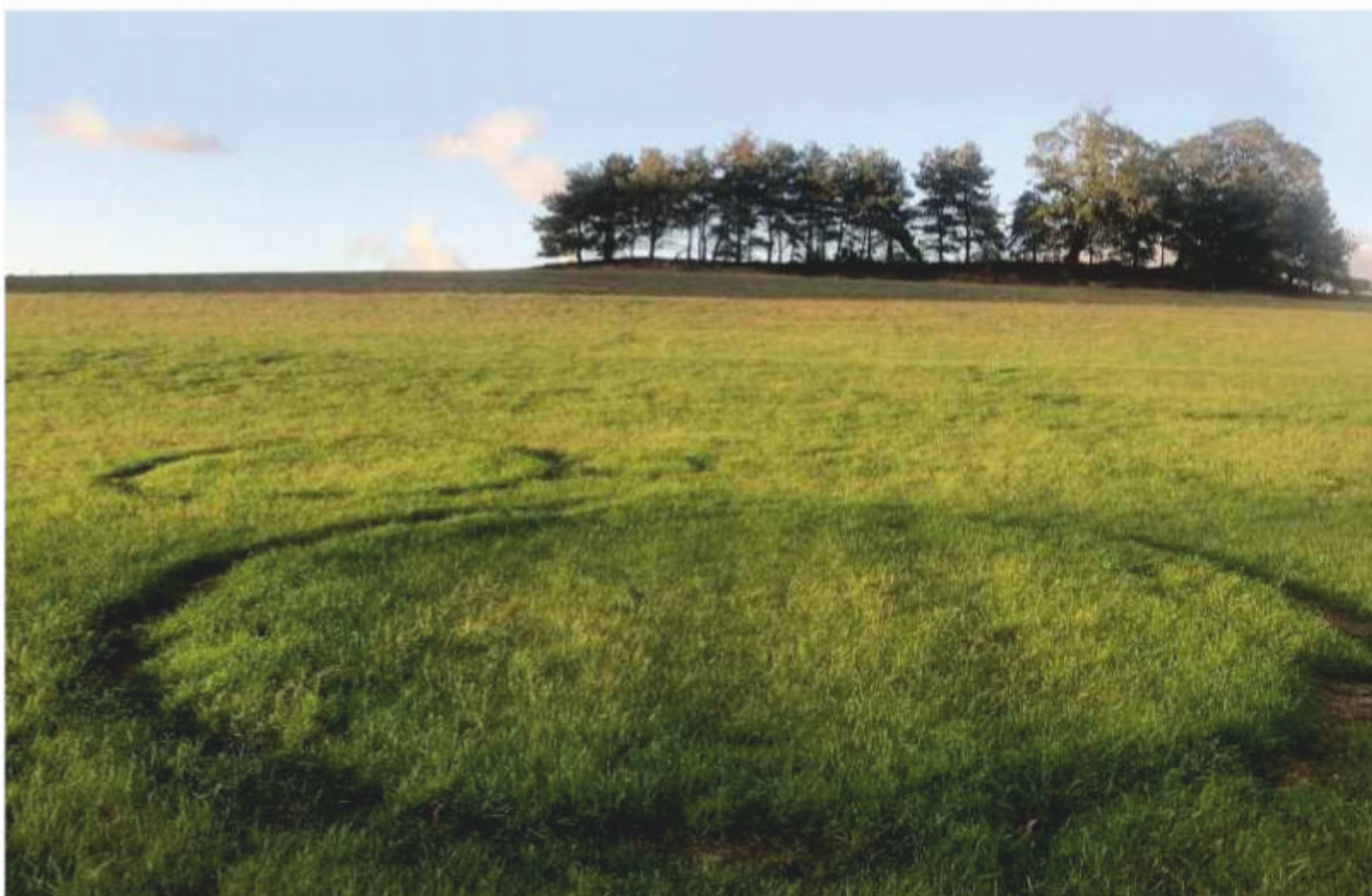
Friends of 40 years Terry Huggins, 61, and John Hill, 57, beat odds of 17 million to one when they both hit holes in one at Langdon Hills golf course, Essex. They were playing doubles when Terry sunk a 165-yard (151m) shot with his six iron on the 14th hole. John then used a seven wood on the par three hole to equal his friend's feat. *D.Mirror*, 18 May 2018.

FINGER-LICKIN'

A shopper in Belarus discovered a human finger in a packet of frozen chicken that was traced back to a worker in a poultry factory. Police traced the supplier in Minsk and found that the finger belonged to a man who had hidden the fact he had lost several in an industrial accident – raising the possibility that more digits would be found in other packets. *Metro*, 27 June 2018.



MARTIN ROSS

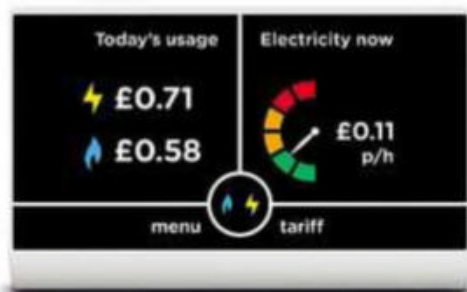


PHOTOS: MARTIN BARBER / BBC EAST

NORFOLK FAIRY RINGS

Rings that appeared on sloping grassland at High Ash Farm, Caistor St Edmund, Norfolk, in mid-October measured up to 4m (14ft) in diameter. According to folklore, such 'fairy rings', 'elf circles' or 'pixie rings' are associated with dragons, dancing fairy folk or the site of an underground fairy village. French tradition held that fairy rings were guarded by giant bug-eyed toads that cursed those who entered. Elsewhere, entering a fairy ring would result in the loss of an eye – or becoming invisible to mortals outside the circle and unable

to leave. Often, the fairies force the mortal to dance to the point of exhaustion, death, or madness. Science, however, asserts the rings are created by fungus that develops underground in a circular formation and slowly gathers nutrients that affect the grass above. They can grow to over 10m (33ft) in diameter. Meadow fairy rings are called free, because they are not connected with other organisms. *BBC News*, 16 Oct 2018. See film footage at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-norfolk-45706969/giant-fairy-rings-appear-in-norfolk-landscape.



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PAUL SIEVEKING celebrates a pair of watery finds: an ancient shipwreck and a pre-Viking sword

WORLDS' OLDEST SHIPWRECK

An ancient Greek merchant ship has been found lying on its side in the Black Sea 50 miles (80km) off the Bulgarian city of Burgas. The 75ft (23m) wreck is being hailed as officially the world's oldest known intact shipwreck. The mast, rudder, rowing benches and even the contents of its hold remain intact. "This will change our understanding of shipbuilding and seafaring in the ancient world," said Professor Jon Adams, the principal investigator. The reason the vessel, dating back to around 400 BC, has remained in such good condition is that the water is anoxic (free of oxygen). Lying more than 6,600ft (2,000m) below the surface, it is also beyond the reach of modern divers. It is similar in style to that depicted by the so-called Siren Painter on the Siren Vase in the British Museum. Dating back to around 480 BC, the vase depicts a similar vessel bearing Odysseus past the sirens, with the Homeric hero lashed to the mast to resist their songs.

The vessel was one of many tracking between the Mediterranean and Greek colonies on the Black Sea coast. The marine archaeologists with the Black Sea Maritime Archaeology Project (MAP) used two underwater robotic explorers to map out a 3-D image of the ship and they took a sample for carbon dating. As yet the ship's cargo remains unknown – it might include grain, oil, wine or priceless metalwork – and the team say they need more funding if they are to return to the site. Over the course of three years they had found 67 wrecks, including Roman trading ships and a 17th century Cossack raiding fleet. *BBC News, Guardian online, 23 Oct; D.Telegraph, D.Mail, 24 Oct 2018.*

SAGA SALVAGES SWORD

An eight-year-old girl found a sword while wading in a Swedish lake on 15 July. Saga Vanecek found the relic in Lake Vidöstern while at her family's holiday home in Tännö, Jonkoping County. Saga and her Swedish-American family moved to Sweden from Minnesota last year. The sword, which is still in the remains of its wood and leather scabbard, was initially reported to be 1,000 years old, but experts at the local museum now believe it dates from AD 400 to 600, before the Viking era. A brooch of about the same date was later found at the site by archaeologists. The level of the water was extremely low, owing to a drought. "I felt something with my hand and I thought it was a stick," said Saga. "Then there was a handle and I went to tell my dad that it looked like a sword." The local museum, where the sword is now being kept, said it was extremely well preserved. *BBC News, 4 Oct; Guardian, 6+20 Oct 2018.*



BLACK SEA MARITIME ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT



TOP: The world's 'oldest intact shipwreck' was found by an Anglo-Bulgarian expedition at the bottom of the Black Sea off the coast of Bulgaria.

ABOVE: Saga Vanecek with the sword she found while wading in Lake Vidöstern, Sweden.

ERUPTION DATE REVISED

Historians have long believed that Vesuvius erupted on 24 August, AD 79, destroying Pompeii and Herculaneum. This was based on an account by Pliny the Younger, writing some 20 years after the eruption about the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder. "On the 24th of August, about one in the afternoon, my mother desired him to observe a cloud..." he wrote in a letter to the historian Tacitus. "I have faithfully related to you what I was either an eye-witness of myself or received immediately after the accident happened, and before there was time to vary the truth," he wrote. It should be pointed out that the original letter does not survive; various copies over the centuries have contained dates ranging anywhere from August to November, although most scholars have accepted the August date.

Now, however, an inscription has been uncovered that throws this into doubt. It is nothing more than a scrawl in charcoal, probably made by a worker renovating a home, but it is dated to 16 days before the "calends" of November – which is 17 October in our modern dating method. "Since it was done in fragile and evanescent charcoal, which could not have been able to last long, it is highly probable that it can be dated to the October of AD 79," said Massimo Osanna, head of the Pompeii site. He believes the most likely date for the eruption was 24 October. In fact, there had long been speculation that the eruption happened later than August, because of evidence of autumnal fruits, earthenware vessels full of wine, and heating braziers discovered in the ruins. *BBC News, 16 Oct; D.Mail, 17 Oct 2018.*

ANDY VANECEK / TWITTER



CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

231: CARRY ON, CLEO

Obvious titular debt. *Avete* and *Valete*, Kenneth and Sid, not forgetting Amanda Barrie who went from Cleopatra to Alma Baldwin – quite a royal transition.

At the time of writing, Angelina Jolie was still trumpeting her planned remake of the Burton-Taylor epic. Best news was that this is to be her last film.

We're knee-deep in modern biographies – no ancient one, main source being Plutarch's *Life of Antony*: sundry others include histories by Appian and Dio Cassius, some tabloid luridities in Lucan's epic poem on the Cæsar-Pompey civil war, and anecdotes about the lovers' luxuries in Athenæus's *Learned Men at Dinner*. Those by Lucy Hughes-Hallett (1990) and Stacey Schiff (2010) top the competition, along with concomitant review-articles by the ubiquitous and unbeatable Mary Beard.

"If Cleopatra's nose had been smaller, the course of world history would have been different." One may turn up one's proboscis at this most famous of Pascal's *Pensées*. Although we have several ancient pen portraits, no certain representation survives: half-a-dozen competing busts are disputed, all look different.

Apart from nasal philosophy, accounts also emphasise the size of Cleo's mouth, giving rise to the tale that she fellated 100 men in a night – a gobsmacking record, also attributed to Eva Peron, celebrated in Adam Ant's Cleopatra ditty (on YouTube): "Cleopatra did a 10-thousand in her lifetime / Now that's a wide mouth / Cleopatra gave a service with a smile-oh / She was a wide-mouthed girl..." not Adam's best ant-ic.

Cleo is also famous for daily baths in asses' milk, recommended by no less than Hippocrates, emulated (on better authority) by Nero's wife Poppæa and our own Elizabeth I (can't speak for EII). She's also credited with immersion in blood, this being a confusion with 16th-century Hungarian Countess Elizabeth Bathory.

Above all, the tale of her dissolving pearls in wine (or vinegar). BL Ullman (*Classical Journal* 52, 1957, 196 – online), boiled a pearl in vinegar for 30 minutes without effect, but after three hours or



so it was pulverised – only an American classicist could afford to sacrifice a Tiffany jewel for scholarly research – casting pearls before wine – emulating courtier Sir Thomas Gresham who pledged loyalty to Elizabeth I with a goblet of wine containing a crushed pearl.

A better story, though (from Plutarch), is that of young medical student Philotas seeing in the royal kitchen eight boars being cooked simultaneously. Assuming a colossal party was in the offing, he was staggered on being told that only a dozen guests were invited, but not knowing when Cleo wanted to dine, the boars were spitted and ready to cook and be ready at different times – something not attempted by Jamie Oliver or Gordon Ramsay, but one could believe it of Donald Trump.

Given all these costly vulgarities – Cleopatra and Antony called themselves The Society of Inimitable Livers – you have to wonder how rich she was. Schiff (p97n) cites an unattributed calculation that she was the 22nd richest person in history. In the words of American

classicist Roger Bagnall, she had "the equivalent of all hedge-fund managers of yesteryear rolled into one."

The ultimate question: how did Cleopatra die? Everybody's heard of the asp(s) – pre-Orwellian Keep the Asp(idistra) Flying. Donkey's years back (*Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 50, 1964, 181-2), I reviewed the conflicting ancient accounts. They are discrepant over one asp or two – I plumped for a single snake against Egyptologist JG Griffith (*JEA* 47, 1963, 113-18), giving him an ASPO. And the mystery is more serpentine than asp-math. There were stories of poisoned figs, a comb containing the ancient equivalent of cyanide capsule, likewise a lethally doctored hairpin, a wheeze worthy of 007 or *Midsomer Murders*, suggesting Cleo got a Kirby grip on things.

Not content with these possibilities, modern cold case profiler Pat Brown's *The Murder of Cleopatra* (2013 –

reviewed in FT307:59), dubbing Plutarch "the Dan Brown of Roman History", argued that Cleo did not commit suicide but was bumped off by Octavian. This got a respectful *FT* verdict, but was dismissed (*Open Letters Monthly: An Arts & Literary Review* – online) by Steve Donague as an "idiotic book so hilariously self-serving that it's worth pausing over."

Only right to conclude on this note, Cleopatra herself having disposed of two brothers, a sister, and sundry other victims. As depicted in the 1983 BBC series 'The Cleopatras', her Ptolemaic family history largely consisted of two things: murder and incest, Cleo being the end product of three uncle-niece marriages and three sister-brother ones – Ptolemies believed in keeping it all in the family.

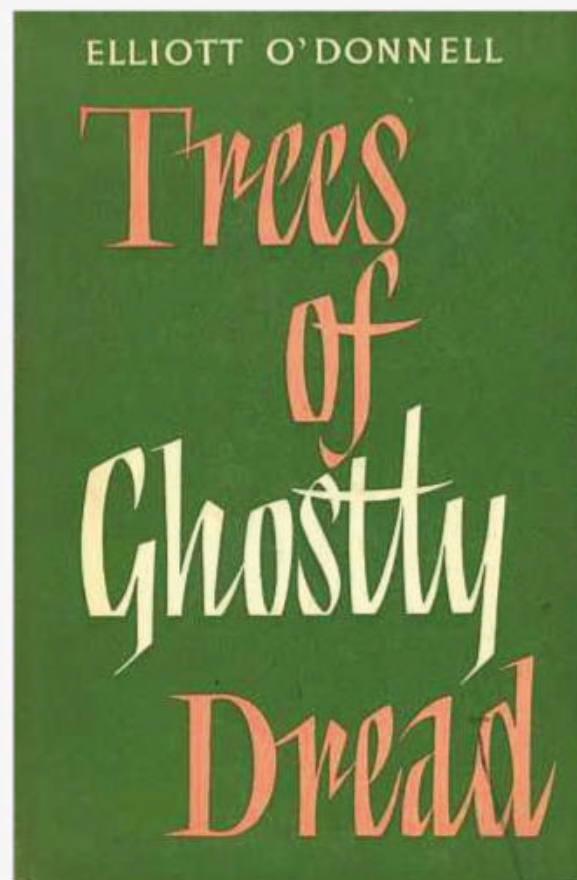
"What a weak distorted image / Elizabeth and Richard gave upon the screen / of that wide-mouthed girl..." – Mr A. Ant's leering finale.

"Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety" – WS, *Antony & Cleopatra*.



2018: The Year in Ghosts

ALAN MURDIE looks back at 2018's phantasmal fashions, including haunted trees and spirit birds



ABOVE LEFT: Is Caterham's 250-year-old cedar "the UK's most haunted tree"? ABOVE RIGHT: Elliot O'Donnell's unreliable 1958 book on arboreal spookiness.

Not long before his death in December 1996, renowned astronomer and sceptic Carl Sagan published his last book, *Demon Haunted World: Science As a Candle in the Dark* (1996). It is a moving work, in some ways reminiscent in tone of the last testimony of HG Wells who penned *Mind at the End of its Tether* (1946) some 50 years earlier, a pessimistic commentary on the trajectory of human progress. At the close of the 20th century, Sagan deplored growing irrationalism and anti-science beliefs exhibited by Western citizens who uncritically embraced such wonders as extraterrestrials, the Turin Shroud, spirit channelling and a whole multitude of other things he deemed occult and superstitious. In passing, Sagan disapprovingly noted that that Britain was "obsessed with ghosts".

Now approaching the third decade of the 21st century (and a whole lot of weird notions and anomalous claims along the way), ghost belief still thrives in the UK, demonstrating the continuing cogency of Sagan's sceptical aside. The last year has generated claims of hauntings at many new locations around the British Isles whilst others suggest certain older, traditional sites are reviving and becoming active again. It is not disputed that many reported experiences appear of psychological

One paranormal investigator warned that the hottest UK summer for 40 years would spark an "invasion of ghosts"

rather than psychical interest and should be treated as 'alleged' unless further corroborated. Of particular note are reports showing the survival of some remarkably primitive and archaic modes of thought about spirits, the like of which would be guaranteed to have the tragically mortal Sagan turning in his grave at Lake View Cemetery, Ithaca, New York, had he not been so fixedly against survival after death.

The hottest UK summer for over 40 years even prompted a warning from one paranormal investigator in Plymouth that rising temperatures would spark "an invasion of ghosts" with apparitions being "summoned" by the scorching heat. (*Sun*, 6 Aug 2018); but an explanation of the postulated mechanism was lacking. Nonetheless, what was offered as evidence that ghosts are capable of turning up the

heat themselves came from Caterham in Surrey, where the *Daily Star* reported that the "UK's most haunted tree" was being blamed for setting alight a car parked underneath its bows. The vehicle went up in flames under the magnificent 250-year-old cedar concerned, which stands along the High Street, on the morning of 12 February 2018. Local resident Karren Lilley, 62, who was present when fire-fighters tackled the blaze, told the press: "It's supposed to be one of the oldest trees and legend has it that it's unlucky to talk when walking under the tree. This belief is apparently widespread around Caterham at the moment."

Haunted and demonic trees feature in ancient ghostlore and fiction (e.g. *The Ash Tree* by M R James) and even have one monumentally unreliable book devoted to them (see Elliot O'Donnell's *Trees of Ghostly Dread*, 1958). Among indigenous and non-Western societies, trees are often believed to house spirit entities, whilst Ireland and the Celtic counties have traditions of 'fairy trees' that must be treated with respect and caution, but I think a tree destroying cars with fiery blasts must be a first.

Coverage by the *Daily Star* has undeniably raised the status of the tree in question, which only merited previously a ranking

as “Caterham’s Most Haunted Tree” or, at a stretch, “Surrey’s most haunted tree” (begging the question, just how many others are growing in the area?). Allegedly, its malign power emanates from a curse laid by a witch who was supposedly hanged from its branches. Problematic, because the last English execution for witchcraft was in 1716 in Huntingdonshire, and nearly all witchcraft offences were repealed in 1736, when the Caterham cedar would have been a mere sapling or more likely not even existed at all, if its estimated age is accurate. Other vague tales assert the phantoms of a nun and monk also haunt the tree, posing further historical puzzles unlikely to be solved (modern Caterham is a largely Victorian expansion).

Possibly the reputation for a haunting stems from garbled accounts of manifestations at a nearby building called Cedar House, dating from the 19th century. The property was a former rectory and is now owned by building contractors Buxtons who, with commendable openness, on 31 October 2017 blogged on their website about poltergeist incidents on their premises.

Around three quarters of poltergeist outbreaks involve short-lived, person-centred phenomena, but around a quarter are place-centred infestations of much longer duration, closer to traditional hauntings. The variety of odd incidents mentioned on the Buxtons blog fits this latter pattern well, suggesting a continuation of a long-established haunting, stretching back to when the building housed clergymen and their families. (‘Poltergeists love rectories!’ declared Harry Price in *Poltergeist Over England*, 1945). Incidents include a stapler flying to the floor untouched, rattling door handles, boardroom cupboard doors bursting open, fruit falling out of bowls, footsteps down hallways and shoes and small items moving of their own accord. Strange mists have been witnessed swirling around an ancient apple tree in the grounds (presumably a runner up or also-ran in the haunted Surrey tree stakes). The rear of the building always feels cold and people are said to experience a ‘damp chill’ rising from the cellar. These sensations of cold might be ascribed to ordinary damp (or perhaps the presence of an old well or underground water) save for them being accompanied by a menacing atmosphere, so intense that “Grown men are known to have left the building in haste” and the last people left in the office can experience “such an overbearing feeling of foreboding that they have had to leave.” These low-level incidents – at least when compared with the car-blasting cedar nearby – are suggestive of a genuine haunting, but autosuggestion

could well play a part.

William James (1842-1910), one of the original founders of psychology and psychical research, observed in *Principles of Psychology* (1890):

“Fear of the supernatural is one variety of fear. It is difficult to assign any normal object for this fear, unless it were a genuine ghost... Certain ideas of supernatural agency, associated with real circumstances, produce a peculiar kind of horror. This horror is probably explicable as a result of a combination of simpler horrors. To bring the ghostly terror to its maximum, many usual elements of the dreadful must combine, such as loneliness, darkness, inexplicable sounds, especially of a dismal character, moving figures half discerned... and a vertiginous baffling of the expectation. This last element, which is intellectual, is very important. It produces a strange emotional curdle in our blood to see a process with which we are familiar deliberately taking an unwonted course”.

An awareness of this panic reaction was recognised in Romania in the 1970s amongst the professional organisers of tours tailored for Western Dracula aficionados, vampire-hunters and cross-and-fang fanatics (see **FT288:50-53**). The late Professor Nicolae Paderaru of Bucharest told me of how, in the early days of Dracula tourism in Transylvania, they had observed initially jovial and relaxed visitors becoming increasingly nervous and fearful as tours progressed, culminating by the end of the week with the guides themselves becoming petrified by the thought of entities in which they firmly disbelieved upon strict ideological grounds! (Romania

was then a rigid communist state). Calling in psychologists to investigate, they concluded unremitting exposure to places with macabre and spooky reputations (e.g. castles, antique ruins, caves and cemeteries) and a succession of blood-curdling stories, both factual and fictional, triggered profound subconscious reactions. Consequently, tour organisers deliberately interspaced the programme with relaxation breaks and stops, providing diversions and light relief from the otherwise incessant recitation of local horrors over the week. This completely solved the problem, save with the most sensitive and squeamish travellers. The dramatic reactions by Buxton staff may be being heightened by the presence in a downstairs room of another folkloric object, “an old oak door studded with nails”, where each nail is said to represent a person who died in an outbreak of plague. I do hope they keep it. (‘Is this Caterham’s Most Haunted Tree?’ *Croydon Advertiser* 10 Dec 2017; advertiser.co.uk/news/croydon-news/caterhams-most-haunted-tree-888553; Buxton’s website <https://www.buxtonbuilding.co.uk/single-post/2016/10/.../Ghostly-Goings-on-at-Buxton>; *D.Star*, 18 Feb 2018.)

From animistic ideas about supernaturally dangerous trees, it is perhaps only a short flit to primitive notions concerning the birds that may perch in their branches. The archaic belief in souls of the dead appearing as birds is re-emerging in Western society since the Millennium, and was the subject of a *Fortean Times* online Forum discussion in 2004. The same year, Norah Green, widow of ghost hunter Andrew Green (1927-2004), told me a few



LEFT: the belief that the souls of the dead can reappear as birds seems to have been enjoying something of a renaissance – particularly when it comes to that common garden visitor, the robin.



GHOSTWATCH

PETER MACDIARMID / GETTY IMAGES FOR NARAS



LEFT: Mitch and Amy Winehouse in 2008. Mr Winehouse claims that his late daughter has been manifesting in ghostly avian form.

months after his death in May 2004 that she had been rather comforted in the days afterwards by visits from a robin that appeared repeatedly in the garden of their cottage 'Scribes' at Mountfield, Sussex, close to the churchyard where his ashes were eventually laid.

Leading this trend in 2018, as is often the way in fashions, is an example involving a celebrity, albeit now deceased. On 1 January 2018 the father of tragic pop singer Amy Winehouse, who died from alcohol poisoning in July 2011 aged 27, told *Sun* reporters: "She does come back – not physically, but spiritually – all the time. I could not begin to tell you how much she is around, there are lots of strange happenings."

He proceeded to openly share with journalists his experiences of encounters with her 'beautiful' ghost at his home in Kent, Amy manifesting both as an apparition and in avian form. The apparitional Amy sits at the end of his bed. "She just sits there and it looks just like her, with her beautiful face and she looks at me," he said. More extraordinary still is his sincere belief that she returns to her family as a blackbird. Just a week after her death, he was at his sister's house when a blackbird flew against the glass with a thud. After it was picked up and placed on a perch, the bird flew back to him and sat on his foot. "And then we put it back again and it came and sat in the middle of us and it sang." He believes this to be a manifestation by the soul of his daughter who in life had a bird tattooed on her arm.

A subsequent article in the *Daily Mirror* focused on this phenomenon of visits from robins, interpreted by grieving relatives as messages from dead loved ones [https://](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/how-robins-proved-loved-ones-10250274)

Mitch Winehouse's sincere belief is that Amy returns to her family as a blackbird

www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/how-robins-proved-loved-ones-10250274 . (*D.Mirror*, 18 Feb 2018).

Of course, sceptics will wag their heads at such notions, which are also attracting criticism and condemnation from religious leaders. For instance, in the USA, the Revd. Merritt Demski, a Lutheran pastor at the Immanuel Church and School at Waterloo, Illinois, denounced such notions as unbiblical ('Ask the Pastor: Are Robins a Sign of Angels or Spirits?' 17 Oct 2017; <https://immanuelwaterloo.org/2017/10/24/are-robins-a-sign-of-angels-or-spirits>). A more encompassing and ecumenical approach might be to recognise bird imagery in use in both the Old and New Testament, or to adopt the mediæval view of the red-breasted robin as a symbol of the blood of Christ and the Resurrection. Otherwise, if considered by psychical researchers at all, these encounters with birds are at most treated as examples of Jungian synchronicity.

Yet before dismissing such claims simply as coincidence and wishful thinking, let us remember that even arch-sceptics may admit limits to 'coincidence' as the explanation for strange events. In 1957 mathematician and psi critic G Spencer Brown argued in *Probability and Scientific Inference* that there might be something

wrong with the logical basis of our ideas of probability, leading to apparently anomalous events and results being viewed as 'paranormal'. More radically, in a now rarely-cited article in 1993, psychologist and arch-sceptic Nicholas Humphrey stated: "We would seem to be faced with a situation where the suggestive phenomena (a) cannot *as a matter of logic* be psychic, (b) cannot *as a matter of fact* be normal, and yet (c) cannot *as a matter of statistics* be chance either" [his italics].

Pondering this conundrum, Humphrey speculated on the existence of other layers of reality and that seemingly inexplicable incidents might supply evidence for 'multiple parallel worlds': the idea being that "at every point of micro-level quantum indeterminacy, where an observer brings about the collapse of the wave-function, the universe branches into parallel worlds in such a way that every possible outcome is realised somewhere or another." Translated to the macro-level, "there would be bound to be a tiny fraction of worlds which would appear to have hosted a strikingly large number of strange and paranormal-like events". Translated into plain English, he was suggesting we live in one of a number of parallel universes, with ours being especially weird in nature. Unfortunately, Humphrey gave up his quest for parallel worlds and by 2001 was telling people that there is no point in trying to explain something that didn't exist. (See 'Is There Anybody Here?' *Darwin College Magazine* March 1993 No. 8; the *Psi Researcher* Summer 1993; *Today* programme, Radio 4, 1 Oct 2001).

Anomalous and ambiguous photographic evidence continues to feature in many ghost reports. Throughout 2018 ghost hunters have held vigils and set traps for ghosts utilising a variety of gadgetry. Sometimes it's a case of beginner's luck as shown at the notoriously haunted Berry Pomeroy Castle near Totnes, Devon, where two separate groups claimed successful photos this year. On 7 April, the Plymouth *Herald* told how a young woman, named only as Chloe, had visited the site the previous Saturday night, along with her partner Charlie and friends Tyler, Mya, Cody and Sam, "intrigued by the general scare factor of the castle". Taking photographs in the early hours they obtained one showing misty shapes, which Chloe interprets as representing two phantom horses and a rider.

The very next day, the *Herald* revealed a second strange photograph, taken as a 'selfie' at the end of a vigil conducted at



TOP: The misty shape photographed at Berry Pomeroy Castle by 'Chloe', who believes it shows two phantom horses. **ABOVE:** A selfie taken at the Castle by three locals, complete with greenish spectre.

the castle six weeks earlier by three local young men, identified only as Wayne, John and Shaun. The trio started ghost hunting only at the beginning of 2018 as a hobby "to keep them out of the pub". Wayne initially thought they would not succeed in capturing any evidence of a ghost at Berry Pomeroy, and I'm not convinced that they did, but he believes they accidentally photographed a ghost which resembles "a mist, but it's green in colour". Perhaps due to the excitement of the occasion, the misty image on the left-hand side of their picture was only noticed two days afterwards. Wayne rejects suggestions it has arisen from tampering. (*Plymouth Herald*, 7+8 April 2018; <https://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/plymouth-news/ghosts-brothers-who-leapt-deaths-1429979>).

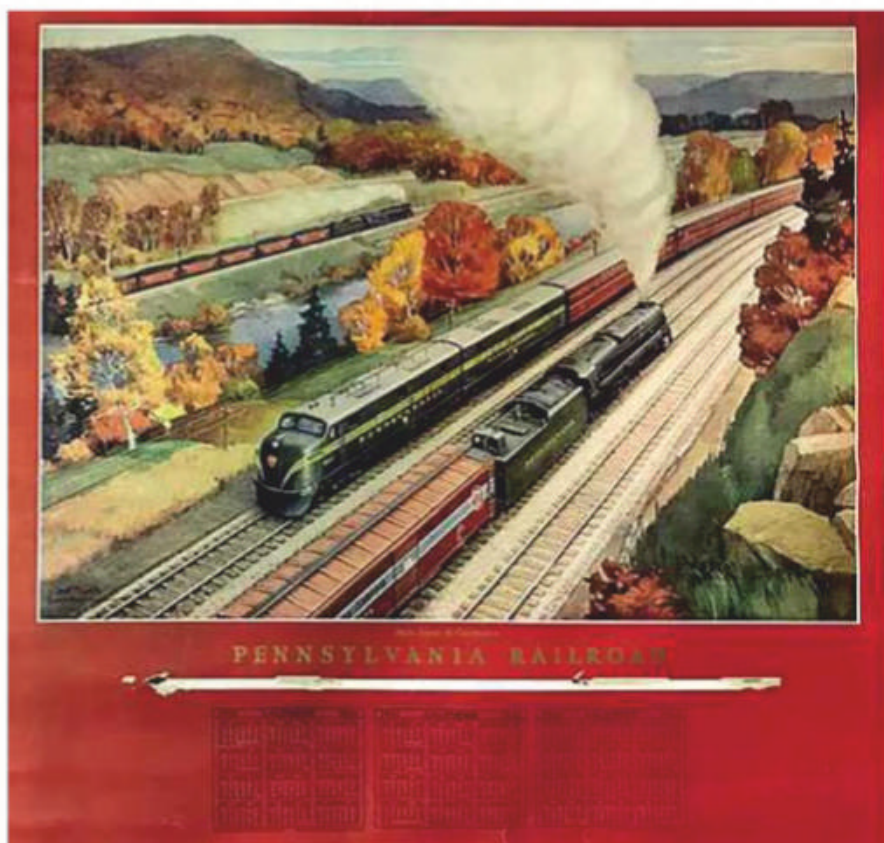
Wayne and Chloe are not the first people (nor, one suspects, the last) to capture strange pictures at Berry Pomeroy. The late Peter Underwood, Ghost Club President, told readers of his *Nights in Haunted Houses* (1994) how a Mr Beer once photographed a ghostly woman accompanied by a spectral ape. This picture was presented to poet and mythologist Robert Graves (1895-1985) who was so disturbed by the imagery he burned it, considering it a vision of "leading apes in Hell", a mediæval metaphor applied to women deprived of physical love in their lifetimes (referenced in *Much Ado About Nothing* and *The Taming of the Shrew*). Casual investigators at Berry Pomeroy should beware the White Lady of Berry Pomeroy, and if it were she who has been caught on film, folklore would consider investigators as having enjoyed a lucky escape, by gazing only upon her image rather than directly on the lady herself. Like the classical gorgon, she is supposedly deadly to encounter. Happily, this story is likely to be an invented Victorian legend, or perhaps an echo of a family-specific death warning. But Underwood also recounts the disturbing aftermath of a vigil on Midsummer's Eve 1983 suffered by a group of ghost hunters who were traumatised by what they believed was the malevolent spirit of a young girl who followed them home. If at all true, it is a chilling tale which cautions against recklessly hunting ghosts at this site.

Finally, I cannot fail to note that in 2018 poltergeists have moved up in the world, after celebrity model Katy Price accused 'messy ghosts' of spoiling her home life. (*Sun*, 3 Aug 2018). If so, it is an exception to the general historical pattern long noted by *Fortean Times* of poltergeists primarily afflicting working-class dwellings rather than the mansions of the well heeled, who may be better placed to withstand them. So, despite the deprecation of sceptics on these topics, maybe we can say there is such a thing as progress after all...

LATE POST

Mysteriously misplaced missives and holiday greetings from beyond the grave feature in our latest mailbag from the postal services' very own Sargasso Sea...

- The family of a soldier who died in Normandy on 27 August 1944, aged 21, were never told of his death because the official letter and his last Will and Testament went undiscovered for 67 years. Documents relating to Private Gordon Heaton of the Worcestershire Regiment, from Handsworth, West Midlands, were left on a bus by a delivery boy and found by Christine McDaid while clearing out the lost property office at the National Express bus depot in Birmingham in November 2011. Heaton's great nephew, David Hall, 51, from Halesowen, searching online for any record of his late kinsman, found an announcement National Express had released about the discovery and was given the documents. *D.Telegraph*, 22 Aug; *Birmingham Mail*, 23 Aug 2012.
- A large tube containing a 1950 Pennsylvania Railroad calendar, addressed to James Flanagan, general manager of *The Times-Tribune* newspaper in Scranton, Pennsylvania, arrived 63 years late in the first week of 2013. The calendar included a holiday greeting from a railroad executive dated December 1949, the month of Flanagan's death. *Shropshire Star*, 2 Jan 2013.
- Anne Tingle from Calgary, Alberta, received a letter from her sister Esther. It had been posted 45 years earlier, in 1969, when Esther was aged nine. (*Adelaide*) *Sunday Mail*, 27 April 2014.
- A posted cheque for a car took 18 years to be delivered 18 miles away to a dealership in Workington, Cumbria. *Sun*, 12 Nov 2011.
- A letter posted in Germany on 2 August 1953 arrived in Slaithwaite, West Yorkshire, in the first week of 2018, 54



LEFT: The 1950 Pennsylvania Railroad calendar that took 63 years to arrive at its destination. Posted in December 1949, it was finally delivered in January 2013.

Largs, Ayrshire, on 16 August 1983, arrived in Southampton in mid-September this year, having taken 35 years to travel about 500 miles. *D.Express*, 20 Sept; *Sun*, 23 Sept 2018.

Is there some kind of postal limbo or Sargasso Sea? There follows a league table of long-lost postcards that have turned up in the last eight years, arranged in descending order of years in transit.

105 YEARS. Card sent in 1911 was delivered to its intended address – No 7 Archfield Rd, Cotham, Bristol – on 9 September 2016. Addressed to Miss A Chappel, the message reads: “Dear Sister, just a line to tell you that I can see you at 7pm Friday next Stokes Croft. Hoping you are well, Burt”. <i>17 Sept 2016.

100 YEARS. Card bearing a photograph of the fire brigade in Trowbridge, Wiltshire, with its horse-drawn carriages. It was posted in Monkton Farleigh, near Bradford on Avon, on 3 January 1912, and addressed to 12-year-old Vida Doel in Paradise Farm, Christian Malford, near Chippenham, Wiltshire. Her family left the address in about 1925. A message from Vida's mother instructs her to take a pony and meet her in Chippenham. The card bears a George V halfpenny stamp and has a second, recent postmark. The card was received by Keith Potter, whose family bought the farm from the Doels about 90 years earlier. *Western Daily Press*, *D.Express*, 7 Dec 2012.

100 YEARS. Card sent by a soldier in November 1917,

years later. Someone had cut off the stamp. Postal employees routinely deny that such time-travelling mail could have languished behind furniture in sorting offices, so we are free to speculate where they have been in the intervening years. However, in this case, unusually, the postman said the letter from Germany had turned up at the sorting office. *Metro*, 4 Jan 2018.

• In June 2014, Therese Pailla received a letter posted six miles away on 27 January 1877. The 138-year-old mail was an order for spinning yarn, addressed to Ms Pailla's great grandmother in Trelon, northern France. *D.Mirror*, 16 June 2014.

• A letter written by a Maine schoolteacher in 1931 to her mother 150 miles away was delivered to the recipient's granddaughter 83 years later. Miriam McMichael had sent the nine-page letter from Houlton to Dollena McMichael in Pittsfield when she was 23 years old. Both women had since died. In the letter,

discovered in Pittsfield post office, Miriam apologises for not writing sooner. *Irish Examiner*, 4 July 2014.

• Sally Waters, 65, was sent a letter by a hotel in Teignmouth, Devon, containing a receipt for a deposit. It was postmarked August 1991 but only arrived 25 years later. The sealed envelope was in a plastic bag with a sticker saying: “We're sorry this item has been delayed in the post”. *Western Daily Press*, 19 Feb 2016.

• A letter sent to himself by a keen stamp collector took 59 years to arrive, by which time he had been dead for 20 years. William Henry was 28 when he posted the first day cover from the Scouts' Jubilee in Sutton Coldfield, Birmingham, in 1957. He died in 1996, aged 67. The letter was delivered to his old house on 2 December 2016. *D.Express*, 17 Dec 2016.

• Postcards are the most common form of delayed mail. A card sent to the parents of Olympic gold medal-winning sailor Iain Percy, sent from



showing a picture of Alfred the Great's statue in Winchester, arrived at North Lodge, Enfield, Middlesex, in January 2018. *D.Mail*, 30 Jan 2018.

94 YEARS. Card from rifleman Alfred Arthur to his sister Nell posted from his camp in Newhaven, East Sussex, in January 1916, was delivered to the house opposite where the late sister lived in Norwich in November 2010. *D.Mirror*, 21 Feb 2011.

86 YEARS. Card mailed in 1924 with a George V penny stamp bearing an order for six dozen bramble scythes. It was delivered to a Sheffield address used by a blade-making firm until the 1950s. *Sun*, 13 Oct 2010.

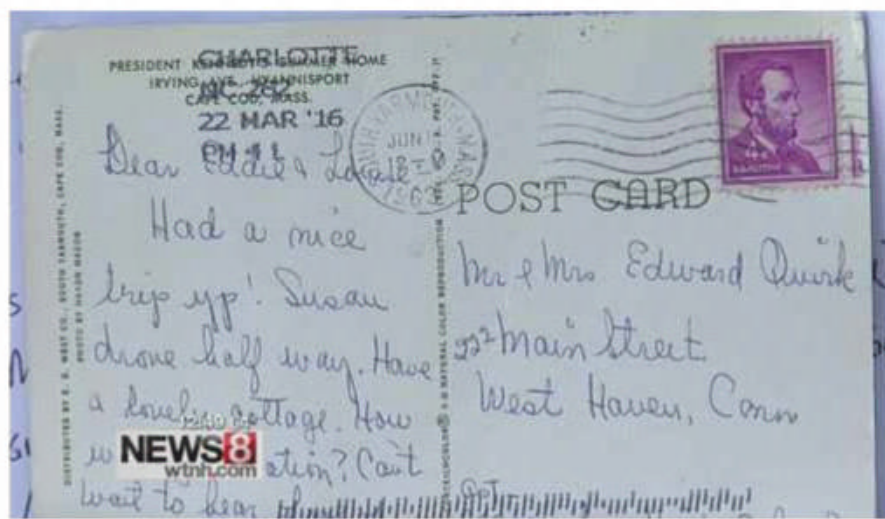
79 YEARS. Card sent from Rockford, Illinois, on 4 July 1943 to Pauline and Theresa Leisenring in Elmira, New York State. *Irish Independent*, 24 Nov 2012.

75 YEARS. Card from Portofino in Italy in May 1937 was delivered in Reading, Berkshire. The addressee had lived there until 2008. *Sunday Mirror*, 30 Sept 2012.

74 YEARS. Card posted in Menton, South of France, on 23 June 1939 was found at a sorting office in Dovercourt, Essex, in August 2013. It was addressed to 4 Albany Grove, Upper Dovercourt, an address that has since been renamed. *D.Telegraph*, 11 Sept 2013.

61 YEARS. Sepia card of Edinburgh Castle posted in Edinburgh on 6 September 1955 reached its destination in Garstang, Lancashire, in May 2017. *D.Express*, 25 May 2017.

56 YEARS. Card posted in Aden on 23 December 1954, was delivered to Margaret Easton, 84, in Preston, Lancashire. It was from her late sister Dorothy, who was emigrating to Malaya (as it then was). *<i>15 Aug 2011.*



55 YEARS. Card posted in Cricklewood, London, in August 1960 arrived at its intended address in Llandudno on 24 June 2016. However, its intended recipient had long since moved away. *Daily Post*, 30 June 2016.

53 YEARS. "We'll probably be home before this gets there!" Those were the words teenager Scott McMurry's mother scrawled across the top of a postcard from Chicago in the summer of 1958. She didn't know how right she was. The postcard bearing a 2c stamp and depicting the Shedd Aquarium finally arrived at McMurry's Virginia home on 1 May 2012. "I recognised my mother's handwriting immediately," said McMurry, now 71. The card was addressed to Clairmont Avenue in Decatur, Georgia, where McMurry grew up; but it showed up in Elizabeth Fulcher's mailbox on Clairmont Lane in South Daytona, Florida. Fulcher posted a picture of the postcard on

Facebook, and her friends helped track down McMurry, a historian with the Justice Department. An April 2012 Michigan postmark suggested it was mailed a second time. *Chicago Sun-Times*, 4 May 2012.

53 YEARS. A card posted in 1963, depicted the Kennedy compound in Cape Cod, arrived at the house of the Quirk family in West Have, Connecticut, on 31 May 2016. It was from Joan Quirk's aunt, who had subsequently died. *wtnh.com (CT)*, 1 June 2016.

51 YEARS. Card from Bangor Bay, County Down, postmarked 7 August 1960, arrived in the Perthshire village of Methven in January 2011. The addressee, Grace Gibbons, was long since gone. *Dundee Courier and Advertiser*, 26 Jan 2011.

49 YEARS. Card from Gudrun Rentrope, posted from Bonn, Germany, in 1963, finally reached his pen pal, Derek Lewis, now 71, in Maidenhead, Berkshire. *Sun*, 18 Nov 2012.

LEFT: A postcard of the Trowbridge Fire Brigade, delivered after 100 years.

BELOW: A 53-year-old greeting from Cape Cod, received in 2016.

49 YEARS. Card with photo of Cheddar Gorge, posted in Burnham-on-Sea in August 1969, arrived at the home of Susan Williams in Mangotsfield, Bristol. *Bristol Post*, 20 April 2016.

46 YEARS. Card from Bert Jacobson, 13, sent from a museum in Pennsylvania in January 1967 to his mother in Oklahoma. *Irish Examiner*, 14 Feb 2013.

45 YEARS. Card posted on the Isle of Wight in 1968 finally arrived in Leicester. *Sun*, 13 April 2013.

41 YEARS. Card from North Wales on 17 April 1970 arrived at Anne Green's house in Blisland, near Bodmin, Cornwall. It was addressed to the Keats family, who sold Anne's cottage to her 33 years earlier. *Cornwall Sunday Independent*, 21 Aug 2011.

40 YEARS. Card from Poole in Dorset, posted on 5 August 1976, arrived in Chester Road, Mickle Trafford, Cheshire, in March 2017. The current occupants had never heard of Karen Tidd, the intended recipient. *D.Express*, 25 Mar 2017.

29 YEARS. Card from Wales in 1981 to Billy Murdoch's parents in Inverness finally arrived with the post office demanding £1.18 in postage. *Sun*, 10 Dec 2010.

21 YEARS. Card depicting two horses on Porlock Hill sent from Taunton, Somerset, in May 1997 reached its intended recipient – John Elliot in Bugle, Cornwall, 100 miles away – in the autumn of 2018. It had a green 20p stamp. *BBC News*, 15 Oct 2018.

For the last round-up of late mail, see **FT270:22-23**.

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KARL SHUKER on a monstrously good exhibition and a new species hiding in plain sight

HERE BE MONSTERS – IN TORONTO

The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library in Toronto, Canada, is currently staging a unique exhibition that will be of great interest to cryptozoologists and monster lovers. Open until 21 December 2018, it is entitled 'De Monstris', and presents an unparalleled array of rare, mediæval encyclopædias, wonder books, cosmographies, compilations of travels, natural history volumes, medical texts, and other popular books from those bygone times, whose pages are liberally populated with bizarre monsters and monstrosities of every kind. Some are highly imaginative, scarcely recognisable depictions and descriptions of real creatures that are now familiar species, but back then were exotic and exceedingly unfamiliar. Others are even more imaginative accounts and artistic representations of beasts that never were, or may exist but have yet to be confirmed by science. So

sea monsters, unicorns, sirens, and dragons jostle for attention with mermaids, manticores, and monstrous humanoid entities sporting the scales of reptiles or a single cyclopean eye or the head of a mule.

There are even various later, literary monsters too, as contained in displayed early editions of Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, for instance, and Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. This fascinating, one-of-a-kind exhibition is curated by Fisher Librarian David Fernandez, who has long been interested in the history and diversity of monsters in bestiaries and other early works, and there will be free curator-led tours of the exhibition on the first Thursday of every month during its tenure. A 144-page catalogue of this exhibition is also available, priced at CAN \$20. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/library-raises-worlds-oldest-monsters-180970471/> 15 Oct 2018; <https://fisher.library.utoronto>.



THOMAS FISHER RARE BOOK LIBRARY

IT'S THE HEADLESS CHICKEN MONSTER!

And speaking of monsters: in recent weeks, videos, photos, and news reports of an extraordinary-sounding creature have been circulating online, especially in social media sites, where it is being referred to as the headless chicken monster. Not having previously heard of any such entity, I was naturally very curious, so I lost no time in viewing these documents. Bright pinkish-red in colour, there is indeed a vague resemblance between its basic outward form and that of a headless chicken, but that is where similarities end. In reality, this 'monster' is a deepsea species of holothurian or sea cucumber, related to starfishes and sea urchins, and is



formally known as *Enypniastes eximia*. It was originally described by science as long ago as 1882, but the reason why it has attracted so much media interest recently (apart from its lurid nickname) is that it has lately been discovered and filmed off eastern Antarctica in the Southern Ocean – the first time that this species' existence in this ocean has ever been documented. Until then, it was known only from the Gulf of Mexico, but has now been filmed in the Southern Ocean by researchers using specialised cameras developed by the Australian Antarctic Division, this discovery thereby providing a very unexpected but greatly welcomed expansion of its known distribution range. The data on this species and others as collected from the cameras were presented at the annual Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources meeting, held in Hobart, Tasmania, commenced on 22 October 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/21/headless-chicken-monster-deep-sea-cucumber-seen-in-southern-ocean-for-first-time> 21 Oct 2018 [includes video footage]; <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/10/22/bizarre-headless-chicken-monster-discovered-antarctic-ocean/1725422002/> 22 Oct 2018.

CRYPTIC CROCODILE NEWLY UNVEILED

In the strict zoological sense, cryptic species are ones that look very like one another outwardly but have been shown by modern-day genetic analyses to be very discrete taxonomically. Until such analyses were developed, cryptic species routinely were mistakenly lumped together, but now they are being recognised as the separate species that they genuinely represent. Some of these have remained hidden in plain sight for a very long time.

The latest notable example to be revealed is the newly delineated and described Central African slender-snouted crocodile *Mecistops leptorhynchus*. Traditionally lumped together with its West African counterpart *M. cataphractus*, it has been shown by new genetic research to have diverged from the latter species over 8 million years ago, when volcanoes arose whose activity split the slender-snouted crocodile population into two, Central and West, with no gene flow between the two occurring thereafter, thus creating two separate, reproductively isolated species. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2018/10/crocodile-new-species-slender-snouted-africa-news/> 24 Oct 2018.



MEDICAL BAG | The power of the placebo is well known, but what about its 'evil twin', the nocebo, which might explain 'voodoo death' and other medical phenomena?

PLACEBOS & NOCEBOS

Extensive studies have demonstrated that the placebo effect not only works on suggestible minds; it can affect all sorts of people, regardless of age, sex or education.

Strangely, the placebo effect has been shown to be effective even when subjects are aware that they have been given an inert drug. A Harvard and University of Basel study involved 160 volunteers who were asked to place their arm on a hot plate until they could no longer tolerate the pain. All received a placebo, but one-third were told they had been given the anaesthetic lidocaine. A second group were told they had taken a dummy drug but were also given a 15-minute talk explaining how placebos worked. A third group, the control, were simply told they had taken a placebo. The first and second groups experienced similar levels of pain relief, compared with the control group. *D.Telegraph*, 27 Sept 2017.

Studies indicate that such 'open-label' placebos will only work under certain circumstances. Symptoms of pain, itching and fatigue may be alleviated, due to the placebo causing an increased circulation of endorphins and dopamine. Genetics play a part too; a 2012 study found IBS patients differed in their responses to placebos, depending on which variants of the COMT gene they had. The thinking is that COMT affects dopamine levels. *Guardian*, 22 May 2017.

Whether or not placebos have an influence on objective measures of disease was the subject of a study of asthma treatments led by Harvard Medical School researchers. Their test group of 39 chronic asthma patients were variously given an active albuterol inhaler, an inactive inhaler, sham acupuncture, or nothing at all. Results showed no improvement in lung function for the placebo recipients, but these same patients did report significant alleviation of their symptoms.



So whilst the placebo caused no objective improvement in symptoms, subjectively, it had. *ScienceDaily*, 13 July 2011.

Biologist Peter Trimmer of the University of Bristol has an evolutionary explanation for the placebo effect. Using computer modelling, he tested a theory first advanced by Nicholas Humphrey of the London School of Economics, whereby the immune system is controlled by an 'on-off switch' in the mind. Since a full-scale immune response is costly in terms of draining energy reserves, it is only triggered, so the theory goes, when there is dire need, such as a potentially fatal illness.

117 immigrants from southeast Asia were found to have died in their sleep

A mild cold or cough won't trigger the response, as such infections aren't serious enough. A placebo tricks the mind into flicking the switch to 'on'.

The last 10,000 years, with human domestication of animals and mastery of agriculture,

BELOW: A Hmong shaman in the USA with his face covered so that evil spirits cannot recognise him.

have led to stable food supplies, meaning there is no longer any need to preserve vital energy. But, Humphrey argues, the human mind has not yet caught up with these developments. *New Scientist*, 6 Sept 2012.

And just as subjects' symptoms may improve when given an inert substance and told that they will benefit from it, so too does the reverse hold true. A 2007 study saw 120 patients with prostate disease given finasteride. Half were told that the drug might cause erectile dysfunction, half not. Six months later, 44 per cent of the first group reported erectile dysfunction, compared to only 15 per cent of the second group. The treatment of all patients had been the same. *Deutsches Ärzteblatt International* (2012); *edicalnewstoday.com*, 16 July 2012.

Although less well-known than the placebo effect, its 'evil twin' the nocebo has been observed in numerous instances. One such is the phenomenon of Chinese Americans dying from particular diseases five years younger than



MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

the average, if born in a year regarded as inauspicious for that particular disease. Patients made to feel anxious prior to an operation are known to require a higher dose of post-surgery opiates than is usual.

And women who believed themselves to be at risk from heart disease were found to be nearly four times as likely to die than were women sharing the same risk factors but not the same pessimistic outlook. *theatlantic.com*, 19 Sept 2011, *Washington Post*, 30 April 2002.

The placebo is less well understood than the placebo, but it has important implications for the medical profession: studies indicate that doctors' warnings of the potential side-effects of a given medication may cause some of these very side-effects to be experienced by the patient. One strategy, then, is to minimise such warning advice. *Deutsches Aerzteblatt International* (2012); *medicalnewstoday.com*, 16 July 2012.

Robert Graves's short story 'The Shout' concerns an Aboriginal Australian shaman who has the power to kill his victims solely

by means of a 'terror shout'. It's a variant of the 'pointing the bone' ritual, prevalent in Aboriginal Australian and other cultures. Victims become listless and apathetic, seemingly resigned to their fate, and die within a few days of the curse.

In medical terminology, such 'voodoo death' has been called psychogenic, psychosomatic or self-willed death, and has been observed in concentration camps or POW camps as well as traditional native cultures (for more on the subject, see 'Strange Deaths', p80). It is the ultimate form of placebo, one that leads to the subject's death. *Irish Times*, 31 Aug 2017.

Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS) is a specific form

of 'voodoo death' afflicting members of the Hmong ethnic group, from Laos. The phenomenon came to light in the USA when 117 immigrants from southeast Asia were found to have died in their sleep; all were young men with a median age of 33, and all but one were in good health. The other unifying factor was that these were recent immigrants, having only spent weeks or months on US soil before their untimely deaths.

Sleep Paralysis: Nightmares, Nocebos, and the Mind Body Connection, a book by Shelley Adler, professor at the University of California, San Francisco, examines SUNDS and related phenomena. She found that the Hmong died from a combination of genetic heart arrhythmia prevalent in southeast Asia and a belief in malevolent spirits. The feeling of something pressing on the chest during sleep paralysis is one found throughout many of the world's cultures. The experience of being "hag-ridden" is accompanied by a sense of great dread, as if an evil being were present.

The Hmong call it *tsog tsuam*, and believe that if they do not offer worship, or perform rituals properly, guardian ancestor or village spirits may be offended and fail to protect an individual, leaving them vulnerable to attack from an evil spirit.

In the 1970s and 1980s, immigrant

Hmong were scattered randomly throughout the USA by the authorities, thus fracturing traditional community support structures. As a result, traditional religious observances were not maintained. Cultural beliefs, together with the alienation and dislocation experienced by new immigrants in a strange land, induced severe stress – which, it is claimed by Adler, led to many otherwise healthy Hmong men dying prematurely.



231: CROCKS



The myth

Before you plant something into a pot, cover the bottom of the container with a layer of "crock" – gravel, broken pottery, or the like. This will ensure good drainage, and prevent the compost becoming airless and soggy. Every gardener learns this at their grandparents' knees, and we've all been doing it for generations untold.

The "truth"

Not only don't crocks improve drainage in pots – they make it worse. Research and experimentation in this century has shown that crocks may block drainage rather than aid it. It was always assumed, until someone got round to testing it, that because water drains faster through coarse materials, a coarse layer at the bottom of a container would mean the water drained more freely. It's now known that the water only drains from the fine compost into the coarse crocks once the compost is saturated. Therefore, it gathers at the border between the two layers, creating a saturated zone inimical to root growth. The best way to improve drainage in a container is to raise it off the ground on "pot feet".

Sources

www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-magazine-monitor-27126160; *Gardening myths and misconceptions* by Charles Dowding (Green Books, 2014); www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/jan/08/old-wives-tales-gardens; www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/gardeningadvice/9946017/Using-crocks-to-help-containers-drain-A-potty-idea.html

Disclaimer

The Royal Horticultural Society website still advocates crocking (even though in 2014 the Chief Horticultural Adviser of the RHS reacted to a *Which?* magazine study of the practice by agreeing that it was pointless), as does just about every gardening book, magazine article or broadcast. So if there is an argument in favour of the old tradition, please tell us about it.

Mythchaser

Visit English Heritage's online shop, and you can buy a mouse mat "Commemorating Roman leader Julius Caesar's invasion of Britain in 54 BC," which is "printed with his immortal words 'Veni, vidi, vici' (I came, I saw, I conquered)." But despite what I was taught at school, the quote actually referred to a battle in Pontus (northern Turkey) – so how and when did the association with Britain begin?



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

NECROLOG

This month, we remember a legend of fortean radio who brought late-night weirdness to listeners across the USA before finally signing off earlier this year



ART BELL / FACEBOOK



SATORI SON / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE LEFT: Arthur William Bell III, better known as radio host Art Bell. ABOVE RIGHT: Bell's KNYE 95.1 studio, near his home in Pahrump, Nevada.

ART BELL

Imagine a marketplace of ideas. A street bazaar where all sorts of secondhand notions, crackpot theories, and anecdotes are ripe for the taking. Nothing has been verified, vetted, or tested. "Sane" concepts like global warming can be found for sale on the same table as hollow earth testimonials, EVP tapes, and backyard dinosaur sightings. The only law of the land is *caveat emptor*. Don't bother asking the bespectacled vendor sitting behind the table for help: he's too busy taking a phone call from a guy who's got a bottomless hole on his property.

For late night radio listeners, that marketplace was just a turn of the dial away on *Coast to Coast AM*. Running from 1989 to 2003, Art Bell's talk show was a staple of the airwaves. People who tuned in, whether out on the road or curled up in the dark at home, could switch on their radio and hear Bell's genial baritone voice urging strangers to share their stories. Listening to Bell on the air, he sounded like the kind of guy who'd cheerfully listen to a fishing buddy claim he'd landed a tuna as big as a Volkswagon and only think to ask which make and model of VW he was talking about.

Passing away on 13 April 2018 at the age of 72, Art Bell left behind a uniquely fortean legacy. Callers would talk to Bell about their alien abduction experiences, their encounters with sinister "shadow people," or their run-ins with cryptids or the Men in Black. Bell would play EVP tapes and recordings that callers claimed were the "sounds of Hel". One particular caller, using the alias of Mel Waters, said that he had discovered a bottomless pit ('Mel's Hole', as it came to be known) near Ellensburg, Washington. Tuning in to *Coast to Coast*, you never knew what to expect from one night to the next.

Bell's interest in radio started while he was still a teenager. According to the *Coast to Coast AM* website, he was an FCC licensed radio technician at age 13 and set a Guinness World Record for a solo broadcast marathon, at more than 116 hours, while working as a DJ in Okinawa, Japan. He served in the US Air Force as a medic during the Vietnam War and in his free time operated a pirate radio station at Amarillo Air Force Base. He would make a point of playing anti-war music (like *Eve of Destruction* and *Fortunate Son*) that was not aired on the

American Forces Network.

He created other radio shows, such as *Dreamland*, *Midnight in the Desert*, *Art Bell's Dark Matter*, and others – but *Coast to Coast AM* was Bell at his peak and remains his most enduring legacy. The nightly show was broadcast by KNYE 95.1, the radio station Bell had founded, from his Pahrump, Nevada, studio. It was syndicated on more than 500 radio stations in North America, and reached between 10 and 15 million listeners a week.

Bell was able to create his vibrant marketplace of ideas by doing something that was practically unheard of in live radio: he didn't screen phone calls, and had no assistants or producers acting as a filter for him.

He rarely editorialised or tried to discredit his callers. Sometimes he'd push back, but in a way that would encourage his tellers to get *really* weird with their stories. One can hear the glee in his voice during a 'Mel's Hole' call when another listener calls in, volunteering to go down the hole on Mel's behalf.

Like Lewis Carroll's Queen, Bell was the type who could believe in "as many as six impossible things before breakfast." His willingness to entertain any

notion, no matter how well-reasoned or how preposterous it sounded, put him on a continuum with folks like Charles Fort and Robert Anton Wilson (who appeared as a guest on the show). And like Wilson, who faced accusations from fans who claimed that his extensive writings on the Illuminati proved he was part of their inner circle, some listeners thought Bell was a government plant who was using his radio slot to disseminate misinformation.

Bell wasn't an uncritical true believer, but he admitted to having experiences and beliefs that kept him from being an agnostic. He shared stories about seeing a UFO while driving back home from Las Vegas. Describing the craft as a massive triangular shape with sides that were 150ft (46m) long, he remarked that "it was silent. Dead silent. It did not appear to have an engine."

Cryptozoologist and FT contributor Loren Coleman was a regular guest on *Coast to Coast AM*, appearing over 40 times, and recalled that the show "served as a forum for many fortean and cryptozoological topics that will not be mentioned in the obituaries you read in the mainstream media. We often discussed Bigfoot,



Yetis, Chupacabras, Mothman, Thunderbirds, other cryptids, and the twilight language. I jokingly would have to steer him away from his humorous questions about Sasquatch and whether they were being dropped by 'flying saucers'."

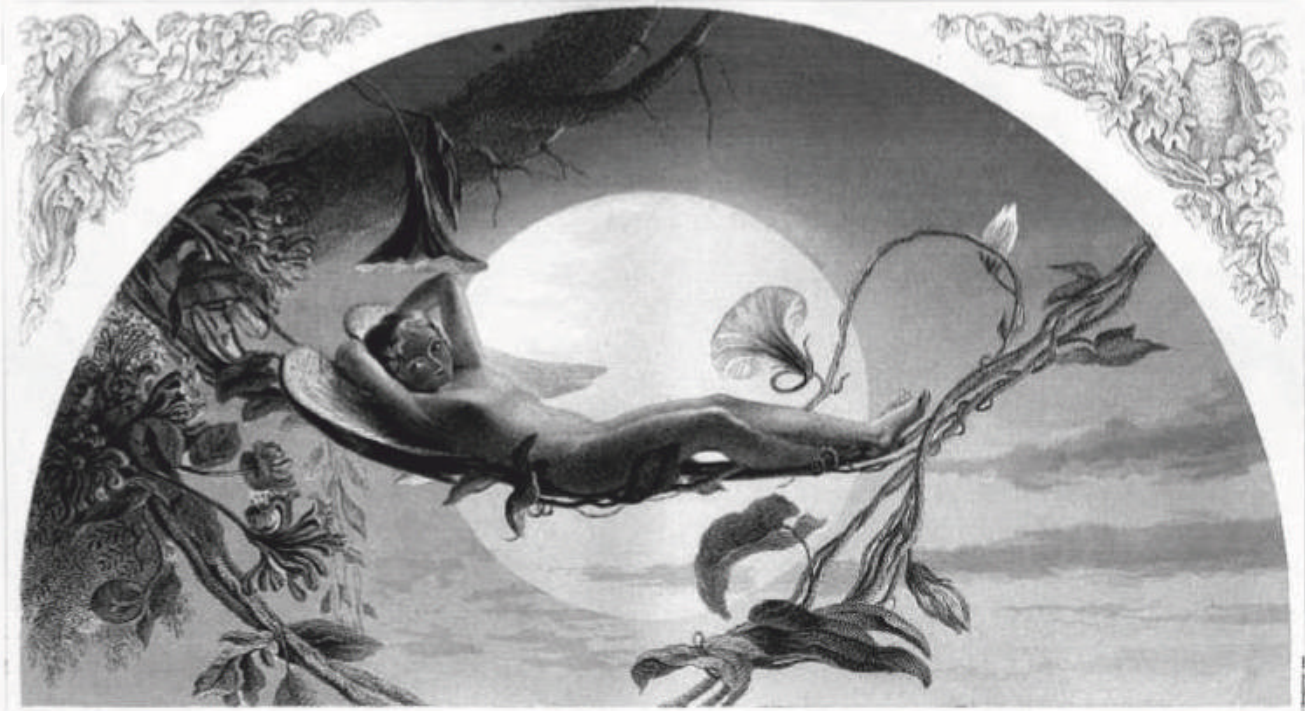
Bell was also the author or co-author of a number of books, such as 1997's *The Quickenings*, in which he proposed a theory of "millennium madness", claiming that "the gravity of events" in the world "seems to be intensifying." The weird events happening in the margins of society were snowballing, according to Bell, and accelerating mankind towards an apocalyptic reckoning. Bell's flirtation with apocalyptic thinking led to the biggest controversy of his radio career, when in 1996 he proposed that the Hale-Bopp comet was being trailed by a UFO. Some of his critics suggested this theory contributed to the mass suicide of the Heaven's Gate cult the following year.

But for all the flack he received over his Hale-Bopp theory and for having controversial figures like David Icke on his programme, Bell remained an influential voice on the air. He semi-retired in 2003, handing over weekday hosting duties to George Noory, who continues to present *Coast to Coast AM* today. As age and ill health caught up with him, Bell finally retired from broadcasting in 2015, leaving behind an archive of show recordings that acts as an unofficial audio book sequel to Fort's *Book of The Damned*: hours and hours of bewildering stories that don't fit into the official narrative of How Things Are.

It's only fitting that he died (from an accidental overdose of prescription drugs according to the coroner's office) on Friday the 13th; any other date would have been too prosaic for Art Bell.

Art Bell (Arthur William Bell III), broadcaster and author, born Camp Lejeune, Jacksonville, North Carolina, 17 June 1945; died Pahrump, Nevada, 13 April 2018, aged 72.

Ashley Naftule



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

KIPLING'S EVIL WOOD

British novelist, short story writer and poet Rudyard Kipling was fascinated by the supernatural. However, I was not aware until recently that he had had supernatural experiences in the Sussex countryside, where he spent most of the second half of his life.

Let's start with a general description of the wood where Kipling encountered the impossible. It seems to have been Glad Wish Wood (Glidwish on the 1878 OS map at Burwash) close by Kipling's house: I'm relying here on the deductions of ghost chronicler R Thurston Hopkins, as Kipling himself did not name the place. "There is a wood about a mile from my house which is full of a sense of ancient ferocity and evil. I have sometimes, while taking an evening walk through it, felt a secretive and menacing feeling all around me, holding me expectant and always on guard. Yes, and in this evil wood, everything is evil. The paths around it are alive with adders; the roots of the trees seem to have been contorted by the Devil; and are always waiting to trip one up – the clinging, trailing brambles reach out to tear at one's eyes with a horrible suggestion of intelligence."

This could, of course, all be rejected as the impressions of an author who – occupational hazard – had a little too much imagination. Kipling claimed that Pook's Hill, also near

his house (and recently found in 19th-century census records), had trackways and greenways that "seemed like exterior nerves and veins for the conveyance" of inspiration to the author! But Kipling also reported one specific supernatural episode in the 'evil' wood. '[T] here is a spirit of some kind there... a very unpolite fellow he is too, for one evening

something suddenly gripped me and despite my attempts to walk forward I was gradually forced back. I felt some unseen, unknown power just pushing against me and in the end I was compelled to turn around and leave the wood in a most undignified manner – just as if someone was ejecting me with the command 'Now then, out you go!'" Was this perhaps Puck, The hero of Kipling's 1906 book *Puck of Pook's Hill*?

I have come across several examples of walkers claiming that either they were forced to leave a place or that they

could simply not make progress down a known path. The experience is, effectively, the opposite of being pixy-led and deserves a name: being puck-blocked perhaps? Incidentally, a ghost hunt was carried out in Glad Wish Woods before the Second World War (under the auspices of R Thurston Hopkins) and one man allegedly smashed the skull of an undead marauding poacher there! But that's another tale...

Simon Young's new book *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies* is out now

"THERE IS A
WOOD ABOUT A
MILE FROM MY
HOUSE WHICH IS
FULL OF A SENSE
OF ANCIENT
FEROCITY AND
EVIL"



UFOs: Any updates?

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research

I harbour a certain nostalgia for Errol Bruce-Knapp's UFO UpDates email list of 20 or so years ago. There were actual discussions about actual things, or at least actual phenomena, and sometimes they went on for weeks. Taking part, for the most part cordially if often trenchantly, were such ufological luminaries of the time as Jerome Clarke, Stan Friedman, David Rudiak, Dennis Stacy, John Velez and many another *soi-distant* abductee including Linda Cortile/Napolitano (who called herself Honey Bee), Greg Sandow, Richard Boylan (till he got the heave-ho), and a cluster of Brit wits, sarcasts and ironists including John Rimmer, John Harney, David Clarke, Andy Roberts and yours truly, plus Jenny Randles, and a host of other commenters ranging from the entirely sensible to the slightly insane and definitively obsessive.

The Brits had a tendency to take the whizz and make up mocking nicknames for the more pompous and pedantic of the Americans – which the Americans never seemed to understand, being *serious researchers* and inhabiting a territory seemingly razor-wired against levity. Much too important, you know. I could fill many a column regaling you with those bygone entertaining and informative exchanges. What I really wanted to note, though, was the strange difference between the old list at its most active and its continuation-cum-reincarnation as a Facebook group.

The old list had about 1,000 members, of whom some dozens posted. The new group has 5,639 at last count, and far fewer participants. Maybe this has to do with the hassle involved in negotiating Facebook's intensely irritating way of laying out discussions and condensing them. Some of the contributors offer excellent stuff: notably Curt Collins's teasers and links to his 'Saucers That Time Forgot' blog (highly recommended for old, obscure and fascinating nuggets from UFO history), and Errol's heir Chris Rutkowski rarely disappoints with either posts or commentary. Stig Agermose is indefatigable in digging out ufological news of all kinds, some of it as batty, and more, as you'd expect. MJ Baniyas regularly offers links to his Terra Obscura blog, which may vary from the eccentric to the infuriating, but always



ABOVE: Was the Roswell 'weather balloon hoax' got up not by the US Military but by devious extraterrestrials? Who knows?

mechanism of contact might apply to alleged mass witnessed 'events' like the Roswell Incident." This has attracted no comments. Perhaps that's not so astonishing, given how many flimsy presumptions are built into the wheeze. Perhaps no one can be bothered with that kind of eye-swivelling stuff anymore, and that ain't such a bad thing. But the puritan in me wants to see Dr Burkes and his polluted thinking taken to the cleaners, and that would have happened in the old days. Even Stan Friedman – perhaps especially Stan Friedman – would have balked.

Rather more depressing are a couple of characters who post on the blog 'Average Gut UFO', who've decided we all need a fresh education in alien abductions. Maybe some people do, but surely by now no one needs re-runs of (an inaccurate version of) the Betty and Barney Hill story, unquestioning acceptance of 'evidence' from hypnosis, and recycled tales of 'screen memories' of aliens masquerading as owls and even Mickey Mouse – although Mr Mouse's

appearance was news to me. In short, the much-debunked fantasies of Hopkins and Jacobs are taken as gospel. No one has commented on any of that either, maybe out of embarrassment. Then we have news of the Chinese government trying to set up a kind of ufological UNO (good luck with that), and some kerfuffle about an airline pilot's sighting of a UFO over Ireland. It so happens the pilot reckoned it was a meteor, but no one's mentioned that. Oh, and there's some stuff about a couple of scientists wondering if they've found evidence, from 234 Sol-like stars, of alien attempts at interstellar communication using laser beams. This gem was published two years ago and got 0/10 marks from the SETI establishment (Snopes has a pithy item on it). Then there's a man who's discovered a Roswell Triangle.

Things, then, aren't what they used to be. At least a properly mixed G&T at the end of the day remains as refreshing as ever which, after this lot, is a mighty comfort in a world going down all the tubes you can think of.

provokes thought. Jan Aldrich keeps us up to date, so to speak, with the 1940s and 1950s.

As I write, the following posts appear before Facebook has to swallow, take a breath, and regurgitate more. Top of the pile is a QWTAIN, or Question to Which The Answer is No: *Was The Roswell Incident Part Of A Masquerade Of Aliens?*, from one Joseph Burkes MD. Dr Burkes ponders: "Last year I read a provocative highly speculative analysis suggesting that it really was a weather balloon that crashed outside of Roswell and that the US Army then hoaxed an alleged ET connection as part of some kind of psi-warfare operation. What if the incident was not faked by US military forces but rather by the so-called aliens themselves?

"I have been impressed how adult experiencers suddenly *de-novo* recall having dreams about UFOs that occurred during their childhoods. What if the memories of those dreams are thought forms implanted decades later into the minds of experiencers. The same



The Twelve UFOs of Christmas

JENNY RANGLES greets the festive season with 12 days of Christmas drawn from her own UFO files

1: CHRISTMAS NIGHT: SANTA ON HIS WAY

1989. A Soviet aerobatics instructor was flying an L-29 jet at 26,000ft (7,900m) near Chelyabinsk, when he spotted a grey object and descended in spirals for a closer look. As he climbed for another descending spiral, the UFO vanished. On landing, the pilot's face, where unprotected by his helmet, stung and looked 'sunburnt'. NASA psychologist Richard Haines visited the base, checking plane and helmet. Both had filters to limit exposure and he told me microwave radiation was likely emitted by the UFO.

2: BOXING DAY: VIRGIN BIRTH

1979, and a young Cheshire woman woke in distress to find blood on her bedclothes. Karen was unexpectedly pregnant after working in Cornwall for the summer, where she witnessed a glowing ball above a field that triggered a 'black out'. Once back in Cheshire, she suffered bad dreams in which her baby was born with an alien face and an unusual degree of intelligence. Doctors said she must have miscarried on the 26th when tests found she was no longer pregnant. After entering a relationship, Karen saw another ball of light outside her bedroom, emitting a humming noise. A tall female being with white skin, slanting blue eyes and white hair took her hand and floated her into the light – where Karen again blacked out. Three years later, she woke in bed holding the hand of a small child. She called her boyfriend. The child disappeared, but the boyfriend confirmed seeing a white ball rising up from the bed and vanishing through the ceiling.

3: 27 DECEMBER: HANGOVER

1979: A car factory worker at Halewood, Merseyside, was walking home after an evening out when he 'sensed' something behind him: "The hair on the back of my head tingled and stood on end... I felt goose pimples on my arms." Turning around he saw what he thought was the headlamp of an approaching motorbike; but it was a floating white sphere, several feet in diameter, heading silently toward him. He watched it pass and the tingling intensified. When about 20ft (6m) ahead, it stopped and shot into the southwestern sky at a 45 degree angle. Despite wearing a hood, the man's hair remained charged with static for two days.

4: 28 DECEMBER: CHRISTMAS STAR

After settling in Ontario in 1969, Patric was driving from Midland to Windsor on heavily snowed-up roads after an accident blocked the main highway. Suddenly the car engine, lights and radio failed and he crawled to a halt in front of a star-like glow with a prismatic multi-coloured aura. Inside it, 100ft (30m) ahead on the road, was a domed object. A loud

humming noise emerged and the object shot into the sky. The car came back to life and Patric drove on, but inexplicably reached Windsor an hour late.

5: 29 DECEMBER: ANGEL IN THE HEAVENS

In 1980, a family was driving south from Macclesfield, Cheshire, in a convoy of cars when they saw an object over a quarry. It was like a fiery angel moving slowly west from near Wildboarclough. They stopped and got out to watch. Despite the quiet surroundings there was no noise from the object, now circular and moving "so slowly it should have fallen out of the sky." Next morning in daylight, heading into Macclesfield alone, one witness saw the same object coming from a field and descending across the road towards a reservoir. He could see that behind the glow there was a metallic shape.

6: 30 DECEMBER: SILENT NIGHT

A man driving on the A4155 from Henley to High Wycombe in 1972 rounded a bend and faced an object like a vertical cone. What seemed to be fluorescent striplights ran down the side and it emitted an intense high-pitched whistle. The next thing he knew, he was driving through Marlowe in total silence with no memory of how he got there, and 90 minutes had vanished from his recall.

7: 31 DECEMBER: AULD LANG SYNE

New Year's Eve 1978, and a 31-year-old married couple, Janette and Ian Tough, were appearing in pantomime in Newcastle. They'd also agreed to do a TV show in Glasgow, and the only way to get there was to hire a light plane between the two cities. On the way, at just after 7pm, they saw a mass of white light heading across their path like a train. They felt very vulnerable as the UFO passed by. On landing, they reported feeling "Fan Dabi Dozi", when the UFO was revealed as the burn up of a Russian rocket. The Toughs are now best known as comedy double act The Krankies.

8: 1 JANUARY: FIRST FOOTING

New Year is busy for taxi drivers and at 1.30am, just into 1993, cabbie Linda had just dropped off revellers at a remote house in Hethersgill, Cumbria. She headed home down a remote track towards the main road. Suddenly, the CB radio she used to talk to her sister in the office began to crackle, then faded entirely. Moments later her car engine and lights failed and she coasted to a halt. Getting out, hoping to walk back to the house, Linda saw a ball of light low over the road heading towards her. It swooped over her roof and shot into the sky causing her skin to frazzle. The headlights came back to life, the car lurched forward, and her sister was

barking into the now working CB asking where Linda had been for half an hour.

9: 2 JANUARY: FOUR (UN)WISE MEN

In 1978, four men were driving home on backroads near Rainford, Merseyside, after a night out, unwisely choosing a shortcut. They took a wrong turn onto a muddy track where they got stuck. Suddenly, ahead of them in the gloom, a strange 'being' came lumbering slowly towards them. It was large, with flashing red eyes and broad shoulders. One terrified man had an asthma attack. After much effort they reversed out of the mud and drove to a nearby farm, where the occupant, seeing their distress, called the police. Officers went to the site, but found nothing. A later investigation proposed the men saw a cow wandering down the lane, the car's headlights reflecting in its eyes.

10: 3 JANUARY: FOLLOW THAT STAR

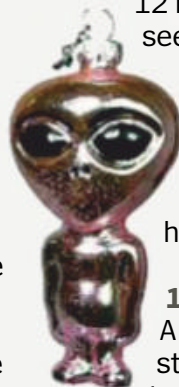
Two young student teachers were driving home in 1974 near Leek, Staffordshire, when a green mass appeared to follow them. The couple felt a "presence", and despite being on a lonely road, they got out of the car to watch a dark mass low above their heads, with arcs of blue and green light encircling them. In terror, they headed off over the moors... but moments later ran over a cattle grid, inexplicably now in the village of Ilam, 12 miles (19km) away. Seconds later, it seemed, there was another bump and they reached a built-up area, which turned out to be a town 20 miles (32km) to the north. They found a police station to report what just happened. Police were baffled, as it was now 3.30am – six hours after the UFO had appeared.

11: 4 JANUARY: ANGEL OF THE NORTH

A technician driving home in 1976 was stuck in rush hour traffic at Sale, heading towards Altrincham, Cheshire. Suddenly his radio started to hiss and crackle and flashes of light sparked out, dancing across his windscreen. As he looked out through the steady rain, two angled ice blue lights passed slowly across his field of view. Moments later they were gone; the sparking stopped and the radio worked as normal.

12: 5 JANUARY: NORMAL SERVICE RESUMED

A sighting was reported to MUFON in 2018 from Linden, Michigan, in the USA. At 1.30am a woman looking from her bedroom window saw an object, much bigger than any aircraft, emitting red/orange light and heading towards her. It stopped dead above her head, then accelerated away, before slowing down. Sadly her phone was on charge so she could not film it, but her husband went outside and said he watched it vanish by "blinking out". On his return he confessed that he had seen the same thing several times over their house two years before.



BLASTS FROM THE PAST

FORTEAN TIMES BRINGS YOU THE NEWS THAT TIME FORGOT

74 THE HEADLESS HORRORS OF SANDLING ROAD

THEO PAIJMANS goes back to November 1963 and a series of high strangeness events in a quiet corner of Kent



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

Bat-winged, headless creatures emanating from UFOs on nightly stretches of road; glowing lights in the fields; mists that stalk and whispers of black magic rituals deep in the woods – for a few weeks in 1963 these were the ingredients of an increasingly bizarre series of occurrences that engulfed the countryside surrounding the villages of Saltwood and Sandling in Kent.

On the cold night of 16 November 1963, at about nine o'clock, four teenagers – three boys and a girl – were walking along Sandling Road, which leads from Saltwood to the hamlet of Sandling, with its railway station. Perhaps they were jittery; there were recent

“It was all black, about the size of a human but without a head. It seemed to have wings like a bat on either side and came stumbling towards us”

local stories about strange sounds heard in Sandling Park, where they now were.

Passing Brockhill School, they saw something resembling a shooting star fall towards the station. “It was uncanny. This reddish yellow light was coming out of the sky at an angle of 60 degrees. As it came toward the ground it seemed to hover more slowly. I grew cold all over as it vanished behind

a clump of trees,” 17-year-old John Flaxton said. When they passed an area known as Slaybrook Corner, they saw a glowing oval object of about 20ft (6m) across resting on a hill on their left. It seemed to move in unison with the group, halting whenever they stopped. Flaxton felt it was observing them.¹

Reaching an incline in the road they saw, some 30 yards

(27m) ahead, a figure with a scarlet cloak and a lantern: “This lantern looked like a hurricane lamp and gave out a whitish light, flickering irregularly. Apparently, it was not swung backwards and forwards, but maintained the same position relative to the body. It was not possible to see the upper part of the body because the light was not strong enough...”² Flaxton described the strange apparition differently: “It was all black, about the size of a human but without a head. It seemed to have wings like a bat on either side and came stumbling towards us.”³ The group hurried to the station; the figure mysteriously disappeared and wasn't seen

again on their return.

Other stories began to circulate of glowing mists stalking people. Flaxton was walking his girlfriend Jenny Holloway to the station when "this white cloud" came towards them. "Then it changed to a red glow, and we just ran." 16-year-old Annette Baxter of Hythe had also seen the white cloud. "But I can't remember anything after that because I fainted."⁴ 17-year-old Keith Croucher was passing Brockhill School football pitch on 21 November. "I felt a sudden breath of cold wind and saw what looked like a golden mist beginning to cross the pitch. At the centre of the mist was a solid oval light that seemed to move slowly over the ground. The whole thing was about 20ft [6m] square. I was frightened and ran away. When I came back it had gone."⁵ That same night, at about a quarter past nine, two boys and two girls were returning from Slaybrook Corner. One of them looked around to see "a golden mist" coming towards them. Fleeing towards Saltwood village, they saw a golden light covering an area of about 20ft² (1.8m²) on a nearby field.

The next day, two boys and three girls on their way to the station saw a star-like object fall out of the sky. Returning from the station, they saw a light which floated over the trees and landed in a field some 100 yards (91m) from the road. One of the girls walked towards the light. Then she saw a dark figure, so she turned and ran. Later that night a figure was seen by five boys and two girls sitting in a car parked beside a quarry on Sandling Road. When they exited the car, it had vanished.⁶

On 23 November, once again, a headless, bat-winged something appeared and was seen by 18-year-old Mervyn Hutchinson from Saltwood,

who was walking with his girlfriend to the station. "We saw a red flash in front of us, like a red ball of fire going down the hill," he said. "Then suddenly this figure appeared. It was rather like a bat. It seemed to have webbed feet but no head. It was a terrifying experience and we just ran."⁷ Another group of teenagers returning home to Saltwood from a dance saw a headless figure about four feet (1.2m) tall. It shambled towards them, so the group fled. Sixteen-year-old John McGoldrick, from Hythe, visited the spot the next day with a friend, and they claimed to have discovered three web-shaped footprints, "almost two feet long [60cm] and about nine inches [23cm] across" and "almost a full inch deep", as well as "a vast expanse of bracken that had been completely flattened – as if some huge and heavy object had rested there". When they revisited the spot a few weeks later, they found the wood "lit up by a strange pulsating light". They observed the light from a distance for half an hour, but were too scared to go any closer.⁸

The last recorded incident took place one night at the end of November. At around a quarter past eight three boys were walking along Sandling Road towards Brockhill School. One of them, John McGoldrick, saw a dark, six-foot- (1.8m) tall figure between the trees in a field to his left. It disappeared, but reappeared in the middle of a hockey field when the boys walked past the school. They climbed a rise in the vicinity of the station, but halfway up the boys noticed a horrible smell "like a corpse". Approaching the top, they saw a figure standing between two small bushes, so they ran back to the road. One of the boys was missing; the other two found him on top of the rise, where they spotted the mysterious

figure again. Then a mist came down around them and they ran back to Saltwood village.⁹

"[T]his is one of the most bizarre series of occurrences we have yet encountered," ufologist Charles Stickland mused a few months later in his summary of the events.¹⁰ The Rector of Saltwood, the Reverend Eric Stanton, expressed his belief in the weird stories: "It is definitely not a hoax. Several youngsters have told me about the strange things they have seen. All were very frightened. Obviously they have seen something out of their normal experience."¹¹

Obviously, incidents this *outré* could be interpreted from any angle or belief. Stanton blamed occult activities in the area: "There are rumours that a Black Magic circle meets in a secret hideout in the village and that they are responsible." But he added: "I have no proof yet that that they are working in Saltwood..."¹² Stickland, on the other hand, thought the lights were UFOs, but he remained uncertain as to what the bat-winged creature had been. Doctor Bernard Finch, another ufologist, knew the answer to that question. While everybody else was settling down to enjoy Christmas dinner, Finch prepared to travel to Saltwood to hunt for "evidence of flying saucers and space men". "I believe it could have been a visit by an intelligent being from another planet", Finch stated.¹³

Waveney Girvan, at the time editor of *Flying Saucer Review*, agreed: "He was probably wearing a type of spaceship equipment that accounts for his peculiar shape and gait." Why an interstellar visitor would visit Saltwood was explained with the (since discounted) straight-line theory of French ufologist Aimé Michel. According to this theory, a newspaper pointed out, the only saucer

route to cross the British Isles departed from Calais to pass over Liverpool into the North Atlantic, and Saltwood was the exact spot where the route cut across the Channel coast.¹⁴

The strange occurrences were never fully investigated. Stickland, who had corresponded with a number of witnesses, promised a detailed report but it never materialised. We hear no more of Finch. Another ufologist, A Cecil Harper, visited the area. He did not interview any witnesses but he studied the locale and came up with a number of mundane explanations. Lympne airfield was nearby, for instance, so an oval light might have originated there. Fluorescent lights had been installed in a new classroom in Brockhill School, and these might have been responsible for the golden mist seen over the football field. The dark headless figure could have been someone crossing the field from the classrooms, Harper proposed. Although a UFO believer, he nevertheless declared: "I am not satisfied that there was either a contact or that a UFO was involved."¹⁵ In the 1970s, ufologist Chris Wolfe re-interviewed Flaxton. Wolfe concluded that Flaxton had seen a crow, illuminated by the flashing of an electric train passing not far away.¹⁶

The headless horrors of Sandling Road gained notoriety as the forerunners of Mothman, that other headless nightmare, but what really happened at Sandling road remains open to question. Interestingly, that same November of 1963, in faraway Spain, hotel manager Mr Sesplugues and his wife were driving between Comarruga and Torredembarra, when they suddenly saw from a distance of about 490ft (150m) ("a black creature, the size of a man but without a head, crossing the road ahead of them").¹⁷

NOTES

1 Michael Field, "Is This Ghost from Outer Space?", *Today*, undated, 1963.

2 Charles A Stickland, "Sightings at Saltwood, Near Hythe, Kent", *LUFORO Bulletin*, vol. 4 No. 5, Nov-Dec-Jan 1963-64, pp2-3.

3 Field, op. cit.

4 "A Martian Visits Lovers

lane", *Daily Mirror*, 12 Dec 1963.

5 "The Saltwood Mystery. Strange Happenings in Kent", *Flying Saucer Review*, March-April, 1964, p11.

6 Stickland, p.3.

7 "Rector Hunts Ghost of Love Lane. Black Magic circle", *Daily Mirror*, 25 Nov 1963.

8 "Strange Christmas is

Planned By Doctor. Tracing Flying Saucers and Space Men In Kent", *Liverpool Echo*, 21 Dec 1963; *Flying Saucer Review*, March-April, 1964, pp11-12.

9 Very fragmentary, but this is how the source renders it. Stickland, pp3-4.

10 Stickland, p4.

11 *Flying Saucer Review*, March-April, 1964, p12.

12 *Daily Mirror*, 25 Nov 1963; "Ghost Haunts Lovers' Lane", *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney, New South Wales, 1 Dec 1963.

13 *Liverpool Echo*, 21 Dec 1963.

14 Field, op. cit.

15 A Cecil Harper, "A Saltwood Sighting", *BUFORA Journal And Bulletin*, Vol.1, No.1,

Summer 1964, pp12-13.

16 John Hanson and Dawn Holloway, *Haunted Skies, Volume 2, 1960-1965*, CGZ Publications, 2010, p152.

17 Olmos and Vallée, 'Type-I Phenomena in Spain and Portugal', *Data-Net Special Report*, vol. 5 no. 3, March 1971, p13.

GINGERBREAD HOUSES

These days, the gingerbread house has transcended its origins in 19th century German literature to become a familiar part of Christmas celebrations around the world; but as **THERESE TAYLOR** reminds us, this seasonal sweetmeat has a complicated history that embraces pagan and Christian traditions and the darker side of folklore and fairy tales.

The gingerbread house – a miniature cottage with walls of gingerbread and lavish decorations around the door, windows and roof – has become an increasingly popular component of Christmas celebrations. These beautiful and edible creations show that Christmas continues to be a cultural meeting ground for pagan and Christian legends, as well as literature and folklore. Christmas has previously absorbed themes from the classical world of Saturnalia and the Nordic world of Yuletide, and in the late 20th century the festival took up the gingerbread house – a theme from 19th century popular literature – and repackaged it as a seasonal table decoration. The history of the gingerbread house relates to holy rituals, celebrations, and the fiery, life-giving history of the ginger root, an ancient and significant spice. But, as we shall see, it also draws on darker materials...

INTO THE WOODS

The story of Hansel and Gretel begins with a family afflicted by famine. They have no food to eat, and the mother tells the father to abandon the children – who they can no longer afford to feed – in the forest. Hansel and Gretel overhear this plan, and Hansel takes white pebbles with him in his pocket. The next day, when his father leads them into the forest, Hansel drops the pebbles along the path and, later, the children use them to find their way home.

The parents welcome the children back, but only for a short time. Soon, they are hungry again, and the mother once again tells the father to leave the youngsters in the forest. He is unwilling at first, but is eventually worn down by her insistence. This time, Hansel uses bread crumbs to mark the way, but these are eaten by birds, and the children have no path to follow.



LEFT: Hansel and Gretel are lured into the Gingerbread House in the 'Magic Park' in Verden, Germany.

After enticing the children with more food and clean beds, the witch takes them prisoner.

Hansel is locked up in a stable, where the witch intends to fatten him before slaughter. Every day, she grabs his finger from between the bars, in order to test if he is plump enough for eating. But, in another of the story's use of false appearances, Hansel is using a chicken bone, instead of his finger, to deceive her.

Gretel, meanwhile, is forced to work as a maid. One day, the witch orders her to fire up the oven, and tells her to sit in it to see if the bread is laid out.

Gretel, using a trick often employed in Middle Eastern tales of *djinn*, asks the witch to go into the oven and show her how it is done. As soon as the witch enters the oven, Gretel slams the doors, and bakes her alive.

The witch has suffered the traditional penalty: burnings of women suspected of witchcraft were particularly numerous in German-speaking Europe, where this tale originated. Early versions of the story, from the 17th century, were probably told by people who had witnessed such executions.

Oh how frightfully she howled! but Gretel ran away, and left the wicked witch to burn miserably.

Now free, Hansel and Gretel take treasures from the witch's cottage, and go home. Their father welcomes them, their mother having died.

ORIGINS

The first published version of "Hansel and Gretel" appeared in 1812 as part of an anthology, *Household and Children's Tales*, by the Brothers Grimm. It has been suggested that the origins of this story may date back to the mediæval era, as every element of

"Gretel ran away and left the wicked witch to burn miserably"

They wander, starving, deep in the woods. Then, they come across a beautiful cottage, all made of bread, cakes and spun sugar. The children start eating pieces of this magical cottage.

It is made of food because it is owned by a witch, who wants to lure visitors within. The witch, who lies in wait for her prey, is old and malign.

The witch's eyes were red, and she could not see very far, but she had a keen scent, like the beasts, and knew very well when human creatures were near. When she knew that Hansel and Gretel were coming, she gave a spiteful laugh, and said triumphantly, "I have them, and they shall not escape me!"





ABOVE RIGHT: Jacob Ludwig Karl Grimm (1785-1863) and his brother Wilhelm Carl Grimm (1786-1859), philologists, folklorists and writers of fairy tales. **ABOVE LEFT:** In this 19th century illustration Hansel leaves a trail of white pebbles as his parents lead the children into the woods, where they plan to abandon them.

the tale is pre-industrial. Some believe that it relates to accounts of the Great Famine of the early 14th century. Between 1315 and 1322 all of northern Europe was hit by successive waves of crop failures, social crisis and the breakdown of markets. This catastrophe was so great that it would have left lasting traces in the culture; but there were many famines between the Dark Ages and the 1800s when the Brothers Grimm were travelling around Germany and collecting stories. Another significant event was still to come, when Europe was hard hit by the crop failures of 1848.

Famine was a recurrent nightmare for Europeans. It provides every element of the story of Hansel and Gretel, where food, breadcrumbs, temptations and a fiery oven engage the reader's attention.

Witchcraft is also a key part of the tale, and it is this element which makes the story thrilling rather than sordid and depressing. The witch is hateful, her downfall cause for rejoicing, and she creates magical lures, which give the shimmer of unreality to scenes of otherwise gloomy reality.

THE BROTHERS GRIMM

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm were scholarly, middle-class brothers born in the late 18th century, in the state of Hesse. There was no unified German nation at that time, and the brothers' lives spanned eras of upheaval.

The French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, the uprisings of the early 19th century, utopian nationalistic projects, and eras of famine and mass unemployment were all known to them. They shared the hope of many German-speaking people that their nation would be unified, although they did not live to see it. But they may well have contributed to this project through their work, helping to shape a sense of national identity by collecting traditional tales, popularising an idealised literary image of the peasant life, and spreading the German language through well-written, easy to read and entertaining texts.

The Brothers Grimm asked many people to share their stories, which they then wrote down and edited for publication. The brothers' work was not that of professional folklorists, and their purpose was not to simply preserve traditional spoken tales but to re-present them in a literary form. They re-edited and elaborated the stories they heard, giving suitable moral lessons and emphases.

The tale of Hansel and Gretel was changed by the brothers as it went through several editions. In 1812, the story was harsh and simple. As explained in the *Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales*: "They persistently lengthened and altered the tale from the early terse manuscript version (1810), adding names for the children and

Christian motifs in 1812, transforming the mother to a stepmother in 1819, and further rationalising the abandonment of the children in 1843 and 1857."

Out of the more than 200 tales published in the Grimms' collection, it was "Hansel and Gretel" which became the most famous. This particular story, of the abandoned children tempted by a magical cottage in the forest, has proved particularly memorable. It has elements which not only work in the context of story-telling but lend themselves particularly well to illustration and visual effects.

DARK THEMES

The theme of cannibalism in "Hansel and Gretel" is certainly the most disturbing aspect of the story. The children are threatened first with infanticide, through abandonment by their parents, and then with cannibalism by the witch. The accusation that witches, like Jews and heretics, ate human flesh or blood, was a staple of mediæval sectarian propaganda.

As Norman Cohn explained in his 1975 study *Europe's Inner Demons*, infanticide and cannibalism were allegations made against any outgroups of mediæval Christendom, and these traditions date back to the second century. For Jewish populations, and for women suspected of witchcraft, the tales about consuming the flesh of children had

fatal outcomes. Innumerable people were lynched or burned alive because they were suspected of these imaginary crimes.

The story of Hansel and Gretel showed both sides of the traditional tales about dangers to children. It repeats the old curse about witches eating children, but it also makes clear who exactly it is that plans to have the children killed – their own parents. The story, put in written form after the Enlightenment but before the Industrial Revolution, retains magic but begins to shed the light of reason on human relationships. Although known as a German tale, “Hansel and Gretel” may draw upon Slavic folklore of the Baba Yaga, a witch who roamed the forests, carrying a pestle and mortar and seeking children whom she would eat.

The homicidal role of the parents of Hansel and Gretel may have been disagreeable to the story’s early audiences. As noted, in later editions of the tale the mother becomes a step-mother, and thus can be distanced from family bonds and more easily seen as evil. The return of the children, and their reconciliation with their father, was also extended and given more moral weight. As it is, the story places an emphasis on feminine evil, and it is easy to see that the witch and the stepmother are two versions of the same character.

Scholars who have studied the Hansel and Gretel tale have commented on what it teaches children, and also the presence of female archetypes in the story. Bruno Bettelheim suggested that it is a cautionary tale, and that the greed of the children is being rebuked. They are so eager for food that they ignore the obvious dangers of the enchanted cottage made of cake. Feminist scholars such as Maria Tartar have pointed out that the story is about women’s power

used for evil ends. Instead of cooking food and nurturing children, the women of the tale abandon or eat them. In her book on the Grimms’ tales, Tartar suggests that all the evil women in their stories are versions of the one woman: “What is especially remarkable about fairy tales is the extent to which they inflate maternal evil.”

As a cautionary tale, it would appear that the first lesson children would learn from “Hansel and Gretel” is not to trust their parents – a lesson only softened by the emphasis put on the figure of the evil stepmother. I also believe that this is a tale which articulates the role of food in sustaining life, as well as hunger as a primal urge which dissolves our morals and relationships into illusions. Fairy tales, as a genre, are often studied for what they teach children about the world. But their power is more likely to derive from the way that they reflect a child’s view of the world, with all its distortions and its exaggerated restatement of cultural patterns.

THE GINGERBREAD HOUSE

The gingerbread house echoes the theme of food in a reflexive, symbolic way that shows the workings of the unconscious mind. The house seems to be edible and delicious, but it is a prison where children are not fed, but rather turned into food. In the story, the witch’s cottage is made of various foodstuffs, and when eating it, the children are prey, like mice before a cat.

The house was built of bread, and roofed with cakes; and the window was of transparent sugar. ‘We will have some of this,’ said Hansel, ‘and make a fine meal. I will eat a piece of the roof, Gretel, and you can have some of the window-that will taste sweet.’ So Hansel

reached up and broke off a bit of the roof, just to see how it tasted, and Gretel stood by the window and gnawed at it. Then they heard a thin voice call out from inside, ‘Nibble, nibble, like a mouse, Who is nibbling at my house?’

The cottage in the Grimms’ tale is not made of gingerbread. This is a later interpretation, added by bakers making cottages with a folkloric look. Gingerbread has the qualities needed, as it is of dense structure, non-perishable, and has a hard surface ideal for decorations.

The gingerbread house relates to the witch’s power to make material reality unreal through a false appearance. Texts such as *Malleus Maleficarum* inform us that European witches were credited with the ability to make men’s penises appear to be gathered in a magical box, where they waved like wheat in the breeze. The witch could cause people to appear as animals, and vice versa. She could also make baked pieces of children’s bodies look like cake. All of these frightful fantasies about witchcraft relate to human anxieties about sexuality, humanity and food. The gingerbread house is a dwelling place of the human imagination, in all its consolations, its terrors, and its deceptions.

The witch’s cottage is one visual motif that is always present in representations of the Hansel and Gretel story, no matter how varied they may be. Ballets, operas, stage plays and story books all include it. Even a recent film, which takes the Hansel and Gretel story off into a steampunk fantasy of the brother and sister as witch-hunting adults with Gatling guns, retains the house made of sweets, in a form very similar to early illustrations of the tales.



ABOVE RIGHT: Gretel pushes the witch into the oven while a caged Hansel looks on in an illustration from a German book of the 1930s. **ABOVE LEFT:** A display featuring Hansel and Gretel in the Bas Rhin Gertwiller Museum and Gingerbread (*Pain d'épices*) Factory ‘Lips’, France.



ABOVE LEFT: *The Land of Cockayne*, an engraving after Pieter Breughel the Elder, c. 1570. **ABOVE LEFT:** Pastry cook Klaus Ohr poses next to an unfinished gingerbread house at the Duell bakery, confectionery and gingerbread manufactory in Nuremberg. **BELOW:** A Chinese earthenware apothecary's jar for storing ginger.

LEGENDS

The house made of cake was described long before "Hansel and Gretel" was published as a written text. From mediæval times, there had been edible houses in stories of distant lands or enchantments. The Land of Cockayne, a fable of wealth and ease, suggested that in this land of plenty there was a monastic house with walls and hallways made of pies and pasties. The anonymous author does not bother with any moral strictures:

*The tastiest a man could eat.
Flour-cakes are the shingles all
Of cloister, chamber, church, and hall.
The nails are puddings, rich and fat--
Kings and princes might dine on that.
There you can come and eat your fill,
And not be blamed for your self-will.*

Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, was a 17th century English writer who wrote both serious and burlesque literature. Her romantic fable, *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, published in 1656, recounts a voyage to the Kingdom of Amity. A governor lives in a house "built with spices; the roof and beams made of cinnamon, and the walls plastered with the flakes of mace the planches out of nutmegs; the long planches out of ginger; the house was covered on the top, some with pomegranates' rinds, others of oranges and citrons..."

This alluring image gives way to the horrors of cannibalism: "They had a custom in that country, to keep great store of slaves, both males and females, to breed on, as we do breed flocks of sheep... The children were eaten as we do lambs or veal, for young and tender meat; the elder for beef and mutton,



as stronger meats."

The edible house could be seen either as a magical bounty or as a sign of evil. These inversions, and the rapid transition from indulgence to danger, gave folkloric tales their edge.

HISTORY

Gingerbread is a food with many associations. In history, it derives from the honey cakes of ancient Greece and Rome. These were always associated with religions and their festivals. Honey cakes were served in ceremonial ways during rituals, and were shaped as symbols and physical forms to connect with divine powers. The honey cakes of the classical world were

made of flour or breadcrumbs, which were pounded with oil, eggs and honey, then baked as flat loaves or decorative shapes. The pagan religions rejoiced in fertility symbols, and eating phallus-shaped honey cakes was considered auspicious in ancient Rome. The goddess Demeter was honoured by honey cakes shaped as a female fertility symbol, the *mulloi*. As Michael Kronidi has shown, in *Sweet Invention: A History of Desserts*, pagan deities each had their own rituals, often marked by foods shaped into anthropomorphic designs. He comments that later Mediterranean confectionaries, such as St Agatha's breasts, vaguely Christianised these explicit symbols.

Ginger enters history in 500 BC, when mentioned by the Chinese sage Confucius, who said that he always had some when eating a meal. Ginger, first cultivated in China, spread through the trade routes. It was known in the Roman Empire, but was considered a medicine. By the time of the European crusades, it was sailing across the Mediterranean on trading ships and larger supplies had made it a popular spice.

Paul Freedman, in his study *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination*, explains that all spices were understood as having active results on the human body, and ginger was believed by some mediæval Europeans to be associated with warmth and life. Its range of uses went from aphrodisiac to flavouring for a Holy Day sweet, the *Manus Christi* (hand of Christ), a white confectionary made with sugar and ginger.

The early European recipes for gingerbread were of breadcrumbs, pounded with butter, honey and spices, and baked as hard biscuits. Sometimes a raising agent was added, and then it was shaped as little loaves

of sweet bread. The difference between bread, biscuits and cake evolved slowly.

Gingerbread existed in all these forms, and required the specialist skills of bakers. By the 15th century, the makers of gingerbread, and in France the *pain d'épices*, had their own separate guilds. The most renowned centre for the making of gingerbread was the city of Nuremberg, where the woods around the city were well supplied with beehives. Gingerbread is always, in effect, a honey cake, although these days the honey is often replaced by treacle or molasses.

ON THE TABLE

Long before the gingerbread house at Christmas, there was the gingerbread man. This figure is eaten at Easter, the time of sacrifice and resurrection. It is possible that the gingerbread man referred to the memories of the pagan sacrifices of the male, either a person or an animal, which heralded the coming of spring. These brutal rituals were replaced by the Christian teachings of divine self-renunciation and redemption. However, Easter openly appropriated symbols of death, rebirth and fertility.

The Easter gingerbread man, with his spread limbs, is a liminal figure who might be bounding out of the dolmens and pagan altars of our distant past. It is said that women who eat the gingerbread man are likely to find a husband. More specifically Christian are the European gingerbread figures of St Nicolas, baked in December and decorated with red and white icing, marking his clerical garb. These are a staple of German and Polish cuisine.

Elizabeth I, herself a figure with an aura of the fairy world, was the first person in the historical record to have distributed festive gingerbread men. Carole Levin, director of the Mediæval Studies program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and author of *The Reign of Elizabeth I*, has explained that: "She did do a banquet where she had gingerbread men made to represent foreign dignitaries and people in her court."

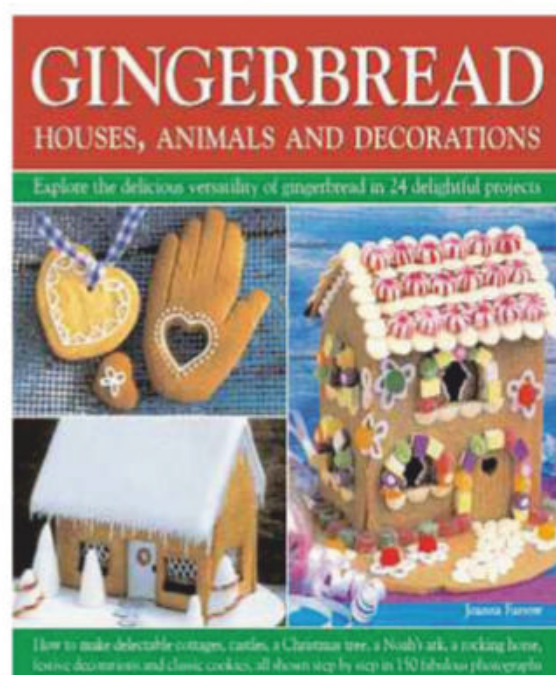
Gingerbread is mentioned in the plays of Shakespeare and Ben Johnson, and in numerous ballads. There were many local traditions, often symbolic and slightly mysterious, such as the fair noted in the *Gloucester Journal* of 10 January 1914, which always had stalls for "the sale of Parliament". This was "unaccountably named pieces of gingerbread" shaped as birds, beasts and fishes. It may be a reference to the popular memory of the English Civil War.

The presence of tales and symbols in gingerbread-making continues as a creative tradition today. A 1997 gingerbread cookbook by Joanna Farrow features a picture of a beautifully shaped and decorated Hamza – the sign of the open hand – a symbol from the Jewish and Islamic world associated with good fortune.



ABOVE: Gingerbread men: would they look so cheerful if they believed they were a folk memory of pagan sacrifices? BELOW: Gingerbread houses, hearts and Hamzas in a 1997 cookbook.

Elizabeth I was the first person to distribute festive gingerbread men



A FASHION FOR HOUSES

As Allen Bragdon writes in his *Gingerbread Book*, gingerbread has always had a "magical appeal". It does not spoil as quickly as other baked goods, and so lends itself to use in decoration: "During the 19th century gingerbread was both modernised and romanticised... enter the gingerbread house."

Gingerbread houses, as Christmas centrepieces, had become common in German-speaking countries by the early 19th century. They were brought to America by German immigrants and were favoured there, becoming a popular local tradition. Many American Christmas treats, such as peppermint candy canes, are also of German origin.

In England, they were less familiar. There is no gingerbread cottage to be found in descriptive 19th century fiction such as Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* or George Elliot's *Silas Marner*. Instead, English people maintained folkloric traditions around the elaborately decorated Twelfth Cake, lardy cake, mince pies, and plum pudding. All of these were confections which enhanced the feast with symbolic and narrative elements.

However, gingerbread houses were made

RECIPES



TO MAKE BUTTERED LOAVES.

This recipe comes from *The Compleat Cook*, published in England in 1658. Take the yolks of twelve Eggs, and six whites, and a quarter of a pint of yeast, when you have beaten the Eggs well, strain them with the yeast into a Dish, then put to it a little Salt, and two rases of Ginger beaten very small, then put flower to it till it come to a high Past that will not cleave, then you must roule it upon your hands and afterwards put it into a warm Cloath and let it lye there a quarter of an hour, then make it up in little Loaves, bake; against it is baked prepare a pound and a half of Butter, a quarter of a pint of white wine, and halfe a pound of Sugar; This being melted and beaten together with it, set them into the Oven a quarter of an hour.



GOOD GINGERBREAD NUTS

From John Mollard, *The Art Of Cookery Made Easy And Refined*, 1802.

Take four pounds of flour, half a pound of sifted sugar, one ounce of caraway seeds, half an ounce of ginger pounded and sifted, six ounces of fresh butter, and two ounces of candied orange peel cut into small slices. Then take a pound of treacle or honey and a gill of cream, make them warm together, mix all the ingredients into a paste, and let it lay six hours; then roll it out, make it into nuts, and bake them in a moderate oven.

GINGERBREAD

A 20th century Australian recipe.

2 cups flour
2 teaspoons ground ginger
½ teaspoon ground cloves
½ teaspoon cinnamon
½ cup butter
1 egg
½ cup golden syrup (light treacle)
½ cup milk
1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
½ teaspoon baking powder

Sift flour and spices. Cream butter and sugar, add egg, then golden syrup and milk, bit by bit, mixing well. Fold in the flour. Dissolve the bicarbonate of soda and baking powder in a little boiling water, then add to mixture and mix thoroughly. Pour into a loaf pan, and bake for one hour. Cool on a rack, and let rest until room temperature.



in England. An early example of their presence is that they were included in a 1921 volume, *The Gentle Art of Cookery*. The author, Hilda Leyel, was a scholarly British writer with a great interest in the works of the 17th-century astrologer and herbalist Nicholas Culpeper. Leyel describes how to make a basic gingerbread house, and describes it as an “old fashioned” treat for children. She also recommends lighting it from within with tea lights. There is no suggestion, though, in this 1920s British text, that the gingerbread house is associated with Christmas.

Hilda Leyel’s early 20th century gingerbread house is similar to those now put on festive tables, but it lacked the elaborate design and the pieces were not large. They were propped up against each other and joined only with white of egg, rather than the royal icing favoured by professional pastry cooks. Royal icing, which is showy, being pure white, and very suitable for decoration, being quick to harden, is also an ideal form of cement for the gingerbread house.

From the 1950s onwards, one finds mention in the British media of gingerbread houses in cake baking displays by professional chefs. They drew comment,

and had features such as spun barley sugar windows, which would be beyond the resources of most home kitchens. Until the 1980s, the British cookbooks devoted to Christmas celebrations continued to recommend the traditional treats of puddings and pies.

Suddenly, in the 1980s, gingerbread houses began to appear in texts about Christmas throughout the English-speaking world. They are still uncommon in France, where the Christmas bakeries concentrate on the traditional Yule log. The French log cake, like the gingerbread house, is a sweet made with great care as a miniature sculpture, representing a familiar sight from the winter forest: the viewing of such objects is part of the pleasure of consuming them.

Australian cookery, which followed British trends, had barely a mention of gingerbread aside from ‘gingerbread men’ biscuits for Easter. Again, gingerbread houses for Christmas were not a noticeable feature until the 1980s, when they began to appear alongside other special Christmas fare, especially in illustrated magazines.

Even in northern Europe, where the Germanic traditions of the gingerbread house were already well known, there



ABOVE: Gingerbread houses make it big: Hans Raffert, former White House Chef, with his nationally acclaimed gingerbread house in the kitchen of the Hyatt Regency Hotel, Irvine, California, 1995.

GLENN KOENIG / LOS ANGELES TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES



BERGEN TOURIST BOARD – WWW.VISITBERGEN.COM

ABOVE: The Gingerbread City festival has been held in Bergen, Norway, since 1991, and offers a breathtaking display of gingerbread artistry.

appears to have been an enhanced appreciation for them toward the end of the 20th century. It was in 1991 that the town of Bergen in Norway began its “gingerbread city” festival. Every November, a display is created of houses, cars, and streets, all assembled out of gingerbread. The items are made by local people and in schools. The sheer size of the gingerbread city, with its numerous details and elaborations, make it a remarkable sight, as well as an indicator that, by the 1990s, gingerbread houses were becoming increasingly popular.

The reasons for this Christmas fashion might be a greater willingness to buy professionally made confectionaries. Gingerbread houses are fun to make, but many families take advantage of the availability of elaborate, ready-made and impressive versions from bakeries. Another allure is that the gingerbread house combines visual appeal with sweetness. It is both a decoration and a cake. It reminds people of childhood, and Christmas is a season which draws meaning from our memories of celebration early in life. A gingerbread house belongs in story books, in illustrations, and in a sentiment that tends to celebrate Christmas without defining it through purely religious rituals.

The gingerbread house conveys an appearance of Christmas merriment, but its cultural links go back to folklore,

and its current status has been attained through fashions in baking and decorating. It demonstrates how religious festivals are represented through secular traditions, and this is a theme of our times.

As Jack Zipes has written, our world is full of the influence of the Brothers Grimm and their tales, “which have been translated into 150 languages and have seeped into the conscious and subconscious popular memory of people throughout the world”. They provide a fund of well-loved motifs like the gingerbread house: recognisable, in a hazy sense of common memory, as part of an often-told fairy story. Thus, it keeps its allure, while the more confrontational elements of Hansel and Gretel’s adventure fade into insignificance.

Finally, like the honey cakes of ancient Rome, the gingerbread house is a reminder of how sweetness and celebration mark our festivals. By making a confection which is both a visual decoration and a luscious treat, the gingerbread house rebuts starvation with plenty, and joins our distant past, only remembered in legend, with our current life.

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THE MAGIC OF MISTLETOE

Growing mysteriously in the bark of other trees, mistletoe has long enjoyed a magical reputation connected with everything from ancient Druidic rites to stolen Christmas kisses. It helped Aeneas pass safely through the Underworld, was responsible for the death of Baldur, and has many medicinal properties. **STEVE MARSHALL** celebrates a remarkable plant.

Despite its innocuous appearance, magical mistletoe has a fearsome reputation. The sacred plant of the Druids has long been associated with terrifying midwinter rituals such as animal and even human sacrifice, the office Christmas party, and worse. Mistletoe, we are told, has been revered for thousands of years; its original use in lurid fertility rituals has been sanitised, surviving today in a much-diluted form, in the kissing tradition. But how much truth is there in these claims?

Worldwide, there are more than 1,500 species of mistletoe, all of them parasites. With no roots of their own, they depend on host trees for their water and nutrients. British mistletoe, *Viscum album*, is actually a 'hemi-parasite' since it can also produce sugars by photosynthesis. The Latin name describes the mistletoe's berries: *viscum* (sticky, viscous) *album* (white). The, common name 'mistletoe' is believed to derive from the Anglo-Saxon words *mistel* (dung) and *tan* (twig), since the plant appears to propagate from seeds deposited on the host tree in bird droppings. Seeds are also distributed by birds eating the sticky mistletoe berries and wiping their beaks on tree bark. The mistle thrush (*Turdus viscivorus*) is so named because of its fondness for mistletoe berries.¹

Mistletoe is found all around Britain, growing most prolifically in the south-west midland counties of Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and Herefordshire and around the Severn Estuary into Somerset. Mystical Glastonbury has an extraordinary concentration of mistletoe, much to the delight of its extraordinary concentration of Druids. Thriving in a warm, damp climate, the geographical distribution of mistletoe closely matches that of apple trees – its favourite host. Nearly 40 per cent of Britain's mistletoe may be found in orchards, readily



LEFT: Spheres of mistletoe growing on a lime tree. **FACING PAGE:** Gathering mistletoe on Christmas Eve in a Victorian illustration.

toe sold there is British and from fairly local sources, some is imported from France and elsewhere in Europe.

MISTLETOE MAGIC

It is easy to see why mistletoe was regarded as magical in days gone by. It has no roots, growing inexplicably from the bark of other trees; its berries ripen in the winter, when most other plants are dormant. In summer, when its host tree is in full leaf,

the mistletoe can seem almost invisible; when leaves fall in the autumn it makes a dramatic reappearance, its foliage shining a vibrant golden-yellow amongst the bare branches. Uniquely, mistletoe grows into a spherical shape, forming balls up to a metre in diameter that are especially conspicuous when silhouetted against a winter sky.

Several writers have declared that until quite recently mistletoe was not welcome in churches as a Christmas decoration. Robert Graves, writing in 1948,³ claimed that mistletoe was still specifically banned, though firm evidence of this remains elusive. Can this really be true? It seems rather unfair since holly and ivy, equally associated with pagan customs, are not only used as church decorations – they were given their own Christmas Carol!

Mistletoe may possibly have been frowned on by the Church for its pagan associations and perhaps for its sexual symbolism. The centuries-old 'Doctrine of Signatures' in herbalism survives even to this day: the qualities of plants, healing or otherwise, are thought to be inherent in their appearance. Hence, the spotted leaves of liverwort resemble the liver that the herb is used to treat. Mistletoe could likewise be seen to symbolise male sexuality (at least by someone looking for that sort of thing). Mistletoe's anthropomorphic sprigs bifur-

Mistletoe has no roots, growing inexplicably from the bark of trees

growing on cider, eating and cooking apples but, curiously, not generally on wild crab apples. Other popular host trees include lime, hawthorn, hybrid black poplar and willow. Despite the well-known Druidic connection, mistletoe is rarely found growing on oak trees: a nationwide survey in the late 1970s listed just 11 confirmed mistletoe-oaks in Britain.² Elsewhere in Europe, however, a separate parasitic species *Loranthus europeaus* grows readily on oaks; since it resembles British mistletoe, this may possibly account for the confusion.

Because mistletoe grows readily on apple trees, many orchard owners supplement their income at Christmas by cutting the plant from their trees and sending it to market. Most of the Christmas mistletoe sold in British shops traditionally originates from the annual auctions in Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire. Whilst most of the mistle-





ABOVE: A farmer harvests a crop of mistletoe from his apple trees in Tenbury Wells on the Worcestershire/Herefordshire border. **BELOW:** A man tries to kiss a shy young woman under a sprig of mistletoe, from *The Graphic Christmas Supplement*, 1887.

cate to form V-shaped pairs, like a pair of man's legs. Growing from the centre of the V are the white, sticky berries, which commonly grow in pairs and could be thought to resemble unfeasibly large testicles. This does not sit well with the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe, since a berry must be removed with each kiss. And what do larger clusters of berries symbolise? Unfeasibly large hæmorrhoids, perhaps?

Mistletoe's well-known importance to the Druids of ancient Britain and France was first noted some 2,000 years ago in *The Natural History*, the only surviving book written by Pliny the Elder. Pliny died in AD 79, in the great eruption of Vesuvius; intending to witness the unfolding disaster from close up, he set off in a boat headed for Pompeii and was never seen again. In chapter 95 of his book, *Historical Facts Connected with the Mistletoe*,³ Pliny wrote:

Upon this occasion we must not omit to mention the admiration that is lavished upon this plant by the Gauls. The Druids – for that is the name they give to their magicians – held nothing more sacred than the mistletoe and the tree that bears it, supposing always that tree to be the robur (oak). Of itself the robur is selected by them to form whole groves, and they perform none of their religious rites without employing branches of it; so much so, that it is very probable that the priests themselves may have received their name from

“When found, it is gathered with rites replete with religious awe”



the Greek name for that tree. In fact, it is the notion with them that everything that grows on it has been sent immediately from heaven, and that the mistletoe upon it is a proof that the tree has been selected by God himself as an object of his especial favour.

The mistletoe, however, is but rarely found upon the robur; and when found, is gathered with rites replete with religious awe. This is done more particularly on the fifth day of the moon, the day which is the beginning of their months and years, as also of their ages, which, with them, are but 30 years. This day they select because the moon, though not yet in the middle of her course, has already considerable power and influence; and they call her by a name which signifies, in their language, the all-healing. Having made all due preparation for the sacrifice and a banquet beneath the trees, they bring thither two white bulls, the horns of which are bound then for the first time. Clad in a white robe the priest ascends the tree, and cuts the mistletoe with a golden sickle, which is received by others in a white cloak. They then immolate the victims, offering up their prayers that God will render this gift of his propitious to those to whom he has so granted it. It is the belief with them that the mistletoe, taken in drink, will impart fecundity to all animals that are barren, and that it is an antidote for all poisons. Such are the religious feelings which we find entertained towards trifling objects among nearly all nations.

Pliny is regarded as writing with “variable accuracy” and was not one to let facts get in the way of a good story. Nonetheless, he correctly stated that mistletoe rarely grows on the oak tree, and his account contains other fascinating details, such as the Druids’ reverence for the Moon’s cycles, which has a ring of truth. However, Pliny’s best-known claim, that mistletoe was cut with a “golden sickle”, seems rather less plausible. Mistletoe stems are tough, and gold is soft – it would be far more practical to use a sickle made of bronze, which might appear golden. Perhaps this tale is based on a true observation that has been garbled in the retelling...

There is scant archaeological evidence of mistletoe in prehistoric Britain. ‘Lindow Man’ – a famously well preserved ‘bog body’ from the first century AD – was found in Cheshire in 1984 (see FT373:26-27). Apparently ritually murdered, the victim’s stomach was found to contain traces of mistletoe. Numerous press reports declared Lindow Man to be a ‘Druidic sacrifice’. But the mistletoe remains amounted to just four grains of pollen, which may have been deliberately ingested with mistletoe berries (perhaps taken as medicine) but could just as likely have been blown on the wind and swallowed accidentally.⁵

An Early Bronze Age barrow at Gristhorpe in North Yorkshire was excavated in 1834, revealing a rare and magnificently intact ‘tree trunk burial’. Within the hollowed out oak trunk was the skeleton of a man, wrapped in an animal skin and accompanied by grave goods that included food residue. Beneath the skeleton were several spherical objects that were lauded for more than a century as mistletoe berries. The remains, stored in a Scarborough museum, were re-examined in 2005 and carbon-dated to around 2000 BC. Sadly, the ‘mistletoe berries’ were found to be gallstones.⁶

MISTLETOE MYTHOLOGY

Sir James Frazer cited mistletoe as the ‘golden bough’ carried by the Trojan hero Aeneas, to ensure his safe passage to and from the Underworld. Frazer’s monumental work *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* was first published in 1890. The original two volumes were expanded upon, and by 1915 the third edition had grown to 12 volumes. Frazer’s central theme was the solar ‘dying god’ who was married to an Earth goddess and died each year at harvest, to be reborn in the spring. Frazer believed that the world’s oldest religions expanded on this notion, annually electing a king who represented the dying god and so was ritually killed after his year of service.

In Chapter 64: *The Burning of Human Beings in the Fires*,⁷ Frazer explored the mythology of mistletoe, noting that its medicinal use still continued in Europe, and that barren women in Italy would carry a piece of mistletoe to make them conceive. This same belief was held by the Japanese who, like Pliny’s Druids, valued mistletoe as a ‘cure-



PENRTH MUSEUM



CHRISTOPHER FURLONG / GETTY IMAGES

TOP: A detail from *The Druids Collecting Mistletoe*, an 1832 painting by Cumbrian artist Jacob Thompson. ABOVE: A modern Druid blesses the year’s crop of mistletoe at the annual Tenbury Wells Market.

OH, THE MISTLETOE BOUGH!

It is perhaps surprising that mistletoe features in none of our traditional Christmas carols: is this evidence of the Church's disapproval of its pagan associations? However, a Gothic ballad entitled *The Mistletoe Bough* attained great popularity in mid-19th-century Britain and was a regular feature of Christmas celebrations for many years. The song tells a gruesome tale that was first published in 1822 as *Ginevra*, a poem by Samuel Rogers: in 1830 it reappeared as *The Mistletoe Bough* with music by Sir Henry Rowley Bishop and lyrics by TH Bayley, who also wrote *Home Sweet Home*.

Despite the song's title, mistletoe plays no part in the story, save to establish a Christmas setting. A light-hearted game of hide and seek leads to disaster when a young bride foolishly climbs into an old oak chest; once inside, she is unable to re-open the lid. The castle is searched in vain (not very well, it must be said, since no one thinks to look inside what was presumably a conspicuously large wooden box). Many years later the chest is finally opened, revealing a mouldering skeleton in a wedding dress.

The story is alleged to be based on fact, with several historic houses around England touted as the original location. Top of the list must be Minster Lovell Hall, near Witney in Oxfordshire (pictured at right). There, in 1487, Francis, the 1st Viscount Lovell, disappeared after a row with the Royal Family. Then, in 1708, workmen discovered a secret room, where the complete skeleton of a man (presumably Francis) sat at a table with a book and pen. "The entire contents of the room then turned to dust as they watched." It has been claimed that young brides were fatally interred in oak chests in Exton Hall, Rutland, Brockdish Hall, Norfolk, and in Marwell Hall and Bramwell House, both in Hampshire.

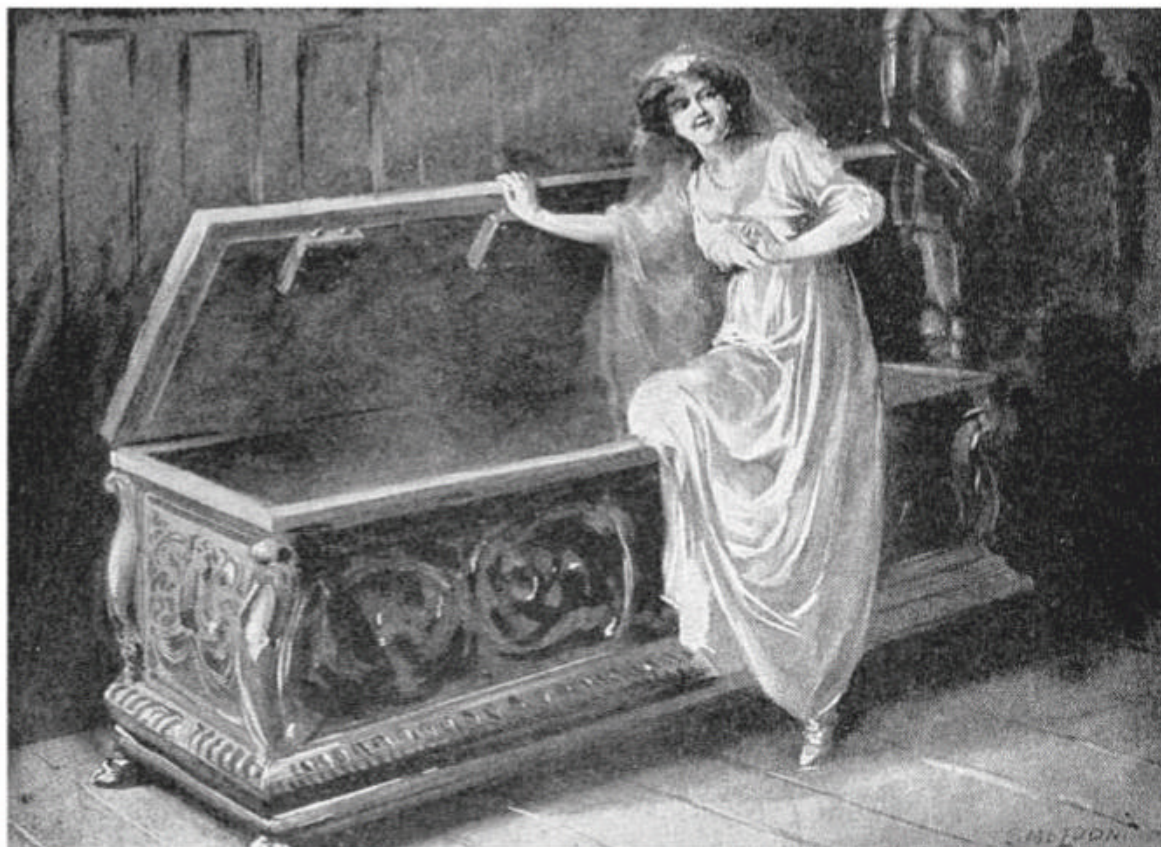
*The mistletoe hung in the castle hall;
The holly branch shone on the old oak wall.
The Baron's retainers were blithe and gay,
Keeping the Christmas holiday.*

*The Baron beheld with a father's pride
His beautiful child, Lord Lovell's bride.
And she, with her bright eyes seemed to be
The star of that goodly company.*

*Oh, the mistletoe bough!
Oh, the mistletoe bough.*

*"I'm weary of dancing, now," she cried;
"Here, tarry a moment, I'll hide, I'll hide,
And, Lovell, be sure you're the first to trace
The clue to my secret hiding place."*

Away she ran, and her friends began



*Each tower to search and each nook to scan.
And young Lovell cried, "Oh, where do you hide?
I'm lonesome without you, my own fair bride."*

*Oh, the mistletoe bough!
Oh, the mistletoe bough.*

*They sought her that night, they sought her next day,
They sought her in vain when a week passed away.
In the highest, the lowest, the loneliest spot,
Young Lovell sought wildly, but found her not.*

The years passed by and their brief at last



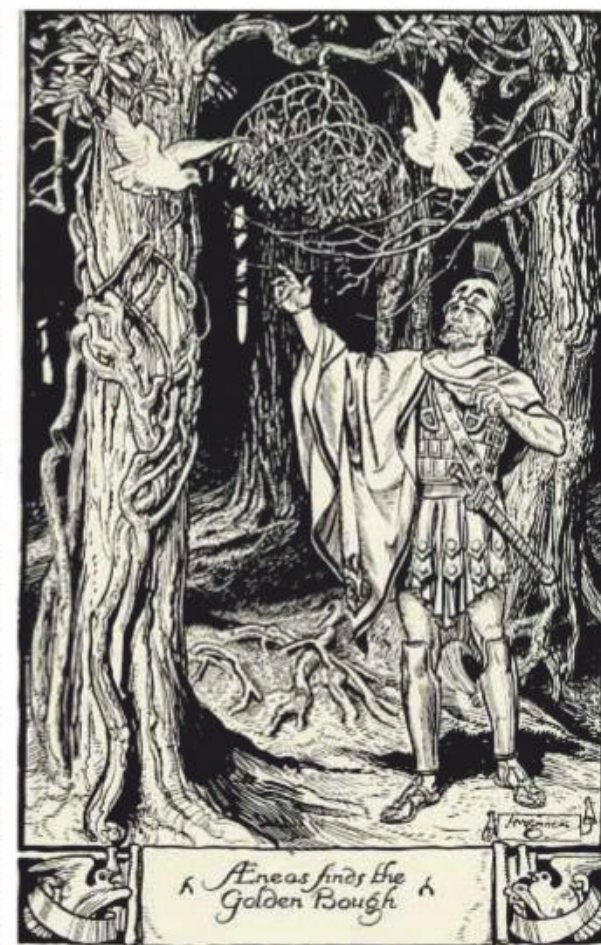
*Was told as a sorrowful tale long past.
When Lovell appeared, all the children cried,
"See the old man weeps for his fairy bride."*

*Oh, the mistletoe bough!
Oh, the mistletoe bough.*

*At length, an old chest that had long laid hid
Was found in the castle; they raised the lid.
A skeleton form lay mouldering there
In the bridal wreath of that lady fair.*

*How sad the day when in sportive jest
She hid from her lord in the old oak chest,
It closed with a spring and a dreadful doom
And the bride lay clasped in a living tomb.*

*Oh, the mistletoe bough!
Oh, the mistletoe bough.*



CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

LEFT: Baldur's death, in an 18th century Icelandic manuscript. ABOVE: Aeneas and the Golden Bough.

all'. Their favoured mistletoe grew not on oak, but willow trees.

Across Scandinavia, the tradition of lighting huge Summer Solstice bonfires still persists; Frazer linked this to the ritual harvesting of mistletoe, proposing that humans were once burned to death in such fires. Frazer transposed mistletoe-gathering from midwinter to midsummer, arguing that the sacrificial victims represented the sacred oak, which must be cleared of its protective mistletoe before it could be burned. Frazer listed many examples of ritual oak fires across Europe, citing the customs of the ancient Celts, Slavs, Romans and others.

Residual evidence of midwinter fire rituals may still be found – notably in the widespread custom of burning an oak yule log at Christmas. Richard Mabey has gathered first-hand accounts of British fire rituals involving mistletoe. ⁸ 'Burning the Bush' persisted in Herefordshire, in various forms, until World War I. A globe was made by twisting mistletoe and hawthorn twigs. On New Year's morning it was burned on a straw fire in the first wheat field to be sown. Elsewhere in the county the globe was filled with burning straw and carried

Loki the trickster fashioned a spear from mistletoe and killed Baldur

by a runner over the first dozen furrows of the field. In another version two globes, one inside the other, were burned together. In most Herefordshire cottages, wrote Mabey, it was customary to cut a mistletoe bough on New Year's Eve and hang it as the clock struck midnight. The bough that had hung throughout the previous year was then taken down and burned.

MISTLETOE MURDER

In Norse mythology the god Baldur the Beautiful (also spelled Balder, Baldr) was the son of Odin and Frigg, goddess of knowledge and clairvoyance. Baldur had many brothers, including Thor and the villainous

Loki, who resented Baldur for his good looks and for being his mother's favourite. Baldur began to have prophetic dreams of his own death; when Frigg had the same dreams, she hatched a plan to save Baldur. Frigg persuaded every object on Earth to solemnly vow that they would never harm her son. But, for various reasons, the humble mistletoe was not included, so it alone made no vow. Loki discovered this and sought out Baldur: he was with the other gods, who were amusing themselves by throwing rocks and other objects at Baldur, in order to see them bounce off harmlessly. Loki the trickster then fashioned an arrow (or spear) from mistletoe wood and either killed Baldur himself or tricked another brother, the blind god Hodur, into killing Baldur. Robert Graves noted that in the Norwegian version of the story, Baldur was fatally injured by a shot to his heel – the traditional weak spot of heroes. Graves also related that he had personally sharpened a stave of mature mistletoe wood in France and found it to be unexpectedly hard and strong.

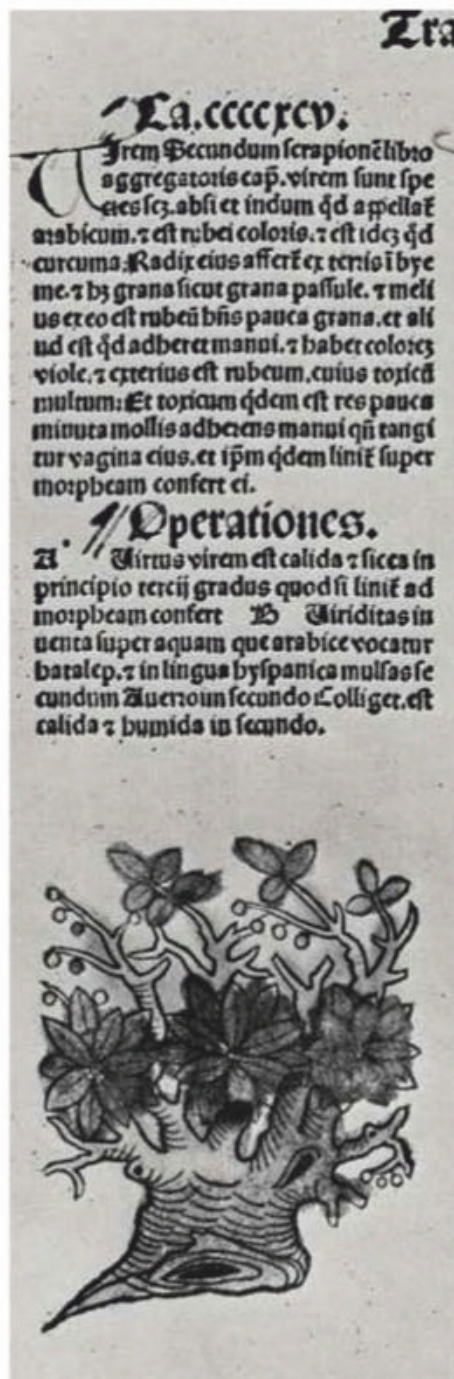
Baldur's story varies in the different Norse sagas, but always ends with his death and immolation on a great funeral pyre. In Victorian Britain, the tale was extended to add credence to the new 'tradition' of kissing beneath the mistletoe. Baldur's mother Frigg was recast as the 'Norse goddess of love'. On discovering that her son was dead, her tears turned into mistletoe berries; she then declared that henceforth mistletoe should be a symbol of love and thus initiated the kissing tradition. Exactly when the kissing tradition was invented is not certain, though some time in the 1830s is likely. A popular export, the custom was adopted by many other countries, notably the USA.

MISTLETOE MEDICINE

The medicinal uses of European mistletoe (*Viscum album*) are probably as old as the legends and magical beliefs that surround this fascinating plant. Mistletoe is a shrub found attached to the branches of broad-leaved trees, particularly apple, lime, poplar and hawthorn. It is hemi-parasitic: that is, it derives some of its nutrition from the host tree, but also uses photosynthesis to produce its own. Mistletoe distributes its seeds largely through the agency of birds and mammals. The berries are covered in a sticky substance which can survive an animal's digestive tract. When the bird or animal defecates onto a branch, the seed sticks to the tree's limb and germinates, drilling down through the wood to reach the host's nutritional system.

Historically, mistletoe was used predominantly in the treatment of nervous disorders, especially for the so-called 'falling sickness' (epilepsy) and 'St Vitus' Dance' (nowadays called Sydenham's chorea). In more recent times, its uses have also extended to the treatment of cardiovascular conditions, and as an anti-cancer remedy. Additionally, mistletoe has immune-system stimulating properties.

All these uses have been supported by modern scientific research. In the case of the cardiovascular system, mistletoe acts as a cardiac depressant, reducing raised blood pressure: interestingly, the best hypotensive activity has been noted from mistletoe collected from the willow tree, a plant that contains natural anti-inflammatory and blood-thinning properties (aspirin, technically salicylic acid, derives both its name and its chemistry from the willow: Latin name *Salix*). Mistletoe can also serve to reduce an over-rapid heart rate (tachycardia) and strengthen the walls of the small blood



ABOVE: A woman carries a branch of mistletoe through the snow. On the reverse of the card are directions for taking Mother Seigel's Curative Syrup. **LEFT:** The oldest printed description and picture of mistletoe, from *Hortus Sanitatis* ("The Garden of Health"), 1491, which describes species in the natural world along with their medicinal uses and modes of preparation.

Loki the trickster fashioned a spear from mistletoe and killed Baldur

vessels (capillaries). It is interesting to note that herbalists treating high blood pressure often combine mistletoe with hawthorn berries and lime blossom, two trees that are among its most frequent hosts.

The plant's neurological activity is largely due to its relaxant properties, possibly by a direct action on the vagus nerve. Again, modern research has supported this traditional use, with for example one report of six cases of infantile

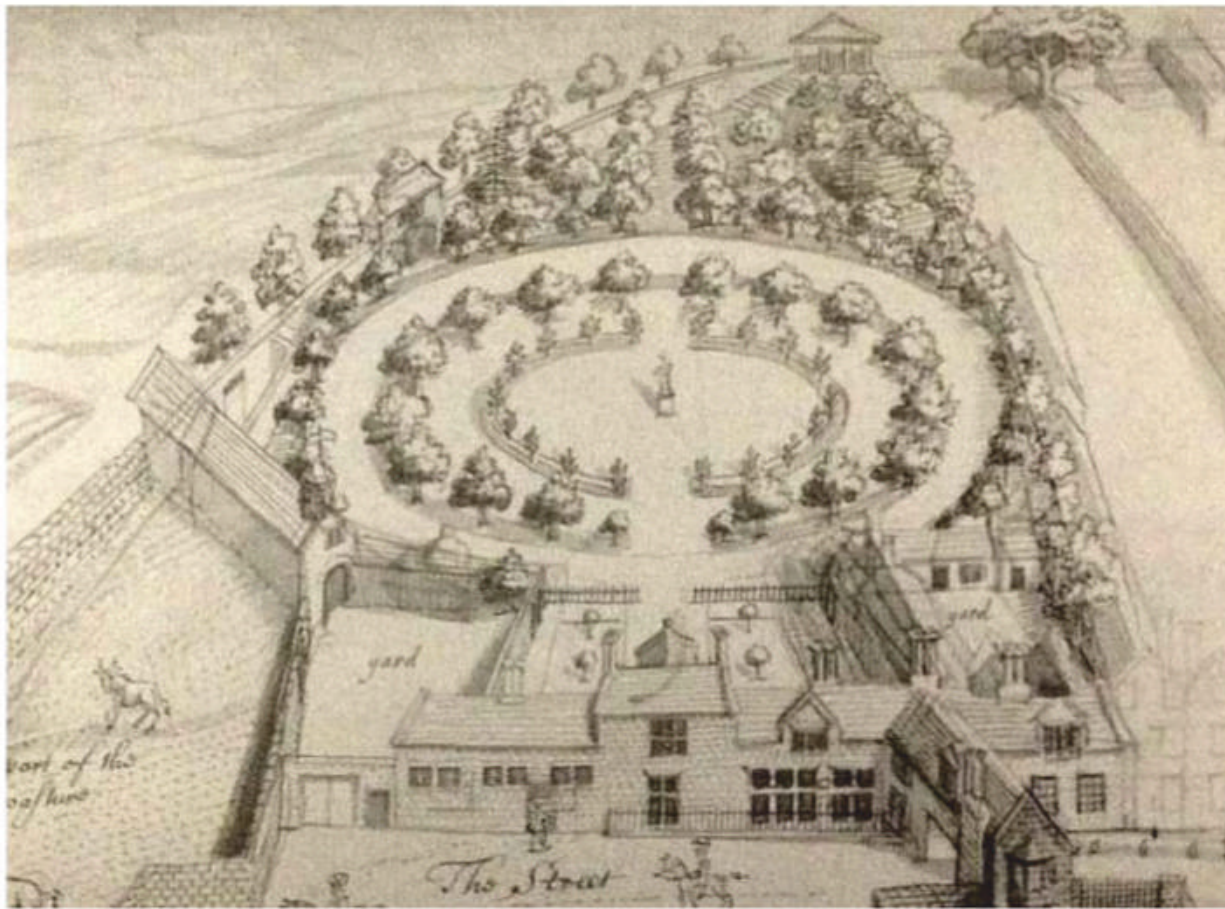
spasms, one nine-year-old child, and two adult patients with epilepsy, all of whom became seizure free on treatment with mistletoe. The plant is also a useful remedy for less serious neurological complaints, such as neurasthenia or generalised nervous debility.

As an anti-carcinogen, mistletoe has attracted a lot of attention. It is used extensively (particularly in Germany) in injectable form, especially for cancers of the breast, colon, cervix, rectum and stomach, and research has shown that the action of constituents in the plant support and enhance the body's own defences against tumours (the so-called "Natural Killer" cells).

It should be noted that it

is the leaves of the plant that are used in herbal medicine, as the berries are toxic (in the UK, preparations of mistletoe berries can only be sold in premises which are registered pharmacies and by or under the supervision of a pharmacist). Equally, incorrect dosage of mistletoe leaves can be toxic. This fact, along with the complexity and seriousness of the conditions treated, means that mistletoe is emphatically not suitable for self-medication, and a qualified medical herbalist should be consulted before use. Mistletoe is unsuitable for use during pregnancy and breast-feeding.

Ned Reiter BA Dip Phyt FNIMH, Registered Medical Herbalist



ABOVE LEFT: Stukeley's drawing of his garden at Barn Hill, Stamford, 1743. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Propagating mistletoe by squashing the berry into the bark of the host tree.

STUKELEY'S DRUIDIC GARDEN

William Stukeley (1687-1765) was an enthusiastic antiquarian, known for his detailed recording of Britain's prehistoric monuments. As an early Freemason and neo-Druid, Stukeley did much to popularise the use and propagation of mistletoe. He proudly wrote that mistletoe had been carried to the high altar of York Minster at Christmas, casting further doubt on its alleged banning by the Church. Dr Stukeley first practised as a physician, then changed career to become a Church of England cleric. Oddly, his ordination, and his simultaneous promotion of Druidism, were encouraged by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The ancient Druids, Stukeley claimed, practised 'Patriarchal Christianity' – a monotheistic religion that recognised the Holy Trinity and was entirely in accord with the views of the Church of England.⁹ His writings on Avebury and Stonehenge contain numerous references to the Bible, and to ancient Egypt, that seem incongruous today but were highly relevant at the time.

Stukeley's repeated claim that the number three had held special importance for the Druids, and for the Egyptians before them, was not just a personal obsession: in the early 1700s it was central to a bitter religious debate. Stukeley was a Protestant, and in common with Catholics he supported Trinitarianism – the orthodox belief that Father, Son and Holy Spirit existed as three equal aspects of the same one God. Antitrinitarianists believed, reasonably enough, that this amounted to polytheism and was therefore heretical. Stukeley attempted to bolster the Church's position by using his antiquarian research and knowledge to prove that Trinitarianism had an ancient lineage. The Druids who built Avebury and Stonehenge, he declared, were Trinitarianists even before the Roman

invasion of Britain. Stukeley's claims were not widely accepted but he was rewarded with promotion in the Church.

In his books, Stukeley proudly announced himself as a practising Druid, adopting the Druidic name *Chyndonax*. As his passion for Druidry grew, he gave it physical expression through gardening. First, in Grantham, Lincolnshire, he made a Druidic garden with a circular orchard, chapel and Roman altar. Around "an ancient apple tree overgrown with sacred mistletoe" a "temple of the Druids" was constructed, using pyramidal topiary instead of standing stones.

In 1730, Stukeley became a vicar and moved to Stamford, Lincolnshire, where he built a considerably larger Druidic garden, 'The Hermitage', covering half an acre. This new effort featured a rustic 'Merlin's Cave' inspired by the grottos that were then becoming fashionable. The garden was stocked with antique masonry gathered from demolished local buildings. Then, in 1741, Stukeley bought another house in Stamford with two acres of grounds, demolishing several buildings on the site to make way for his increasingly ambitious garden schemes. Part of the new garden became a bowling green; the rest became a bucolic Druid's paradise. As Stukeley described it: "All the rest of the ground I threw into a wild forestiere form, full of walks, trees, fruit, flowers, shrubs of all kinds, annual & evergreen, the whole blended together & intermixed without regularity."

No Druidic garden would be complete without the sacred mistletoe and Stukeley enjoyed considerable success in propagating it "on several kinds of trees". He invented a method that he termed 'inoculation' – now known as bud-grafting. He also used the simpler method, common today, of simply squishing a mistletoe berry into the bark

of a host tree. Growing mistletoe from seed in this way is usually successful but cannot be hurried: it takes around three years for the plant to become visible. The best hosts are apple, lime and willow, but mistletoe will also grow on garden shrubs such as cotoneaster.

If readers in the UK are tempted to grow their own mistletoe, please try to use locally sourced berries rather than imports. Mistletoe expert Jonathan Briggs sells 'growing kits' as well as other mistletoe merchandise, and detailed instructions for propagation may be found on his website.¹⁰

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- <http://archive.bsbi.org.uk/Wats23p237.pdf>
- Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, Faber and Faber, 4th edition, 1961.
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- David Boyd Haycock, *William Stukeley: Science, Religion and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century England*, Boydell Press, 2002. See also Steve Marshall's essay on Stukeley: <https://tinyurl.com/ybqxptn9>
- <http://mistletoe.org.uk/homewp/index.php/grow-your-own/>

◆ **STEVE MARSHALL** had a long career as a film composer before becoming an archaeological researcher and the author of three books, including the bestselling *Exploring Avebury: The Essential Guide* (2016) and its musical sequel, *Avebury Soundscapes*, an album of music and 3-D binaural sound.

THE MYTH OF QUEEN MARY'S TREE

Is there any truth to the legend that Mary Queen of Scots planted a much-visited tree near Edinburgh? And what about all the other trees bearing her name? **JAN BONDESON** investigates an arboreal mystery. Illustrated with postcards from the author's collection.

*In the court-yard of the
castle, bound with many
an iron band,
Stands the mighty
linden planted by Queen
Cunigunde's hand ...*
Longfellow

When he visited Craigmillar Castle, just south of Edinburgh, the celebrated North Berwick postcard artist Reginald Phillimore made sure that he also saw and depicted another of the most famous local sights, namely Queen Mary's Tree at Little France. This giant sycamore achieved prominence in mid-Victorian times: said to have been planted by Mary Queen of Scots during her stay at Craigmillar, in the presence of Rizzio and other loyal retainers, it became quite a tourist attraction. Already in 1881, it showed signs of decay, and Mr Little Gilmour, then owner of Craigmillar Castle, gave instructions to have the top cut off.¹ In 1886, Queen Victoria was given a cutting from Queen Mary's Tree in a flower pot, and a picture of it, when she was staying at Dalkeith Palace. The Queen gave instructions for iron railings to be put up to protect the old tree, and the loyal Scots obeyed her. After the distinguished royal association of Queen Mary's Tree had become known, more than 100 patriotic Scots, and people from all over the Empire, wrote to the gardener at Craigmillar asking for cuttings from it.² Lady Marjoribanks had donated a sapling to Ladykirk, which was planted with much ceremony in 1887, and Lord Rosebery had donated another to be planted at Linlithgow Palace.³ In 1892, a disgruntled Edinburgh man wrote to the *Scotsman* newspaper to object that the iron railings put up to protect the old tree planted by Queen Mary were injuring rather than protecting it: one of the



LEFT: Craigmillar Castle, as seen by Reginald Phillimore in early Edwardian times.

other picture postcards of Queen Mary's Tree, one of them stamped and posted in 1908, showing the impressive tree and the cottages in the Little France hamlet.

When featured by the *Edinburgh Evening News* in 1924, the tree was rather diseased-looking. An old Edinburgh man contrasted its current decayed state with what it had been like when he was young: it had stood very tall and

In 1886, Queen Victoria was given a cutting from the tree in a flower pot

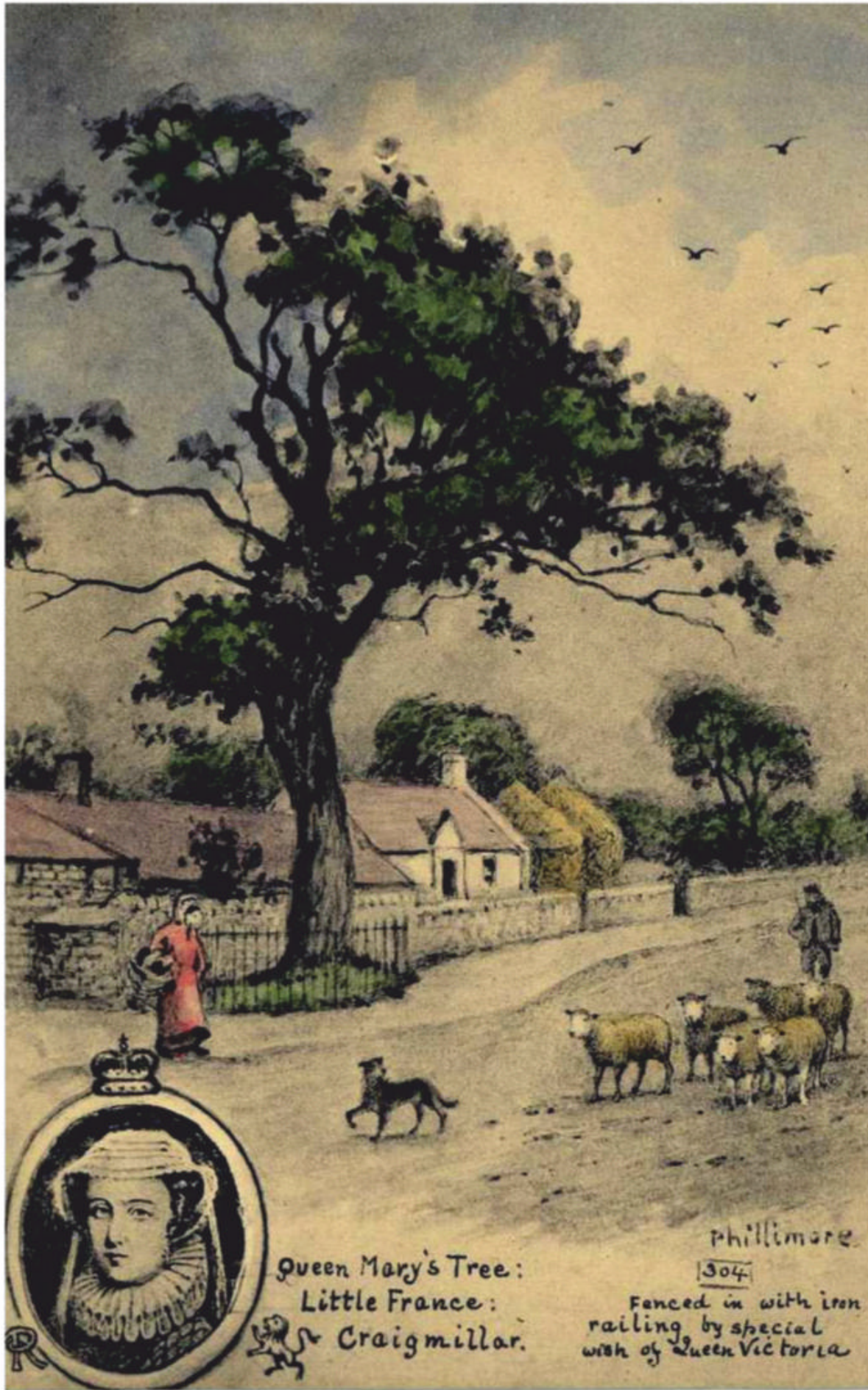
spikes had penetrated the bark, which also bore chipping marks from the knives of relic-hunters.⁴

When Reginald Phillimore saw Queen Mary's Tree in early Edwardian times, it was still an impressive specimen. With his usual attention to detail, he depicted some ancient cottages nearby, known as Little France since they had once been inhabited by the French retinue of Mary Queen of Scots during her stay at Craigmillar Castle. A shepherd with six sheep and a sheepdog are just passing the tree, and an old woman watches them go by. The Little France cottage to the right is still standing, and looks very much like it did when seen by Phillimore, but the others have been extensively rebuilt. I have two

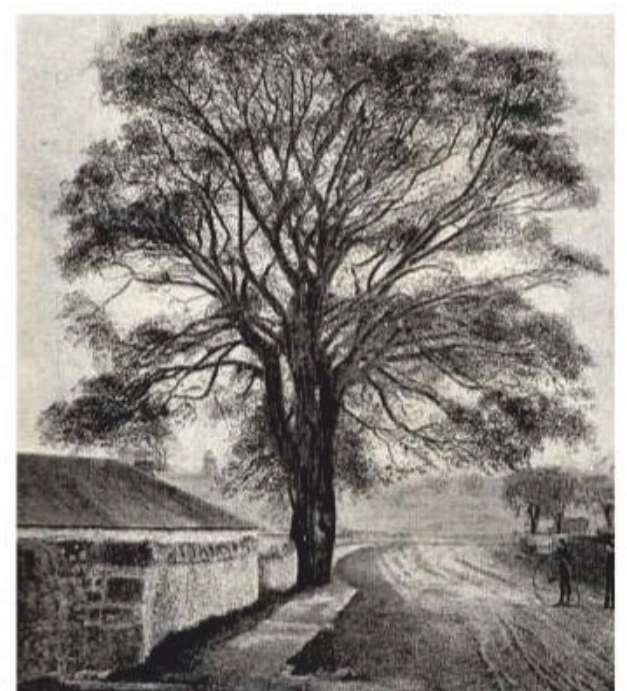
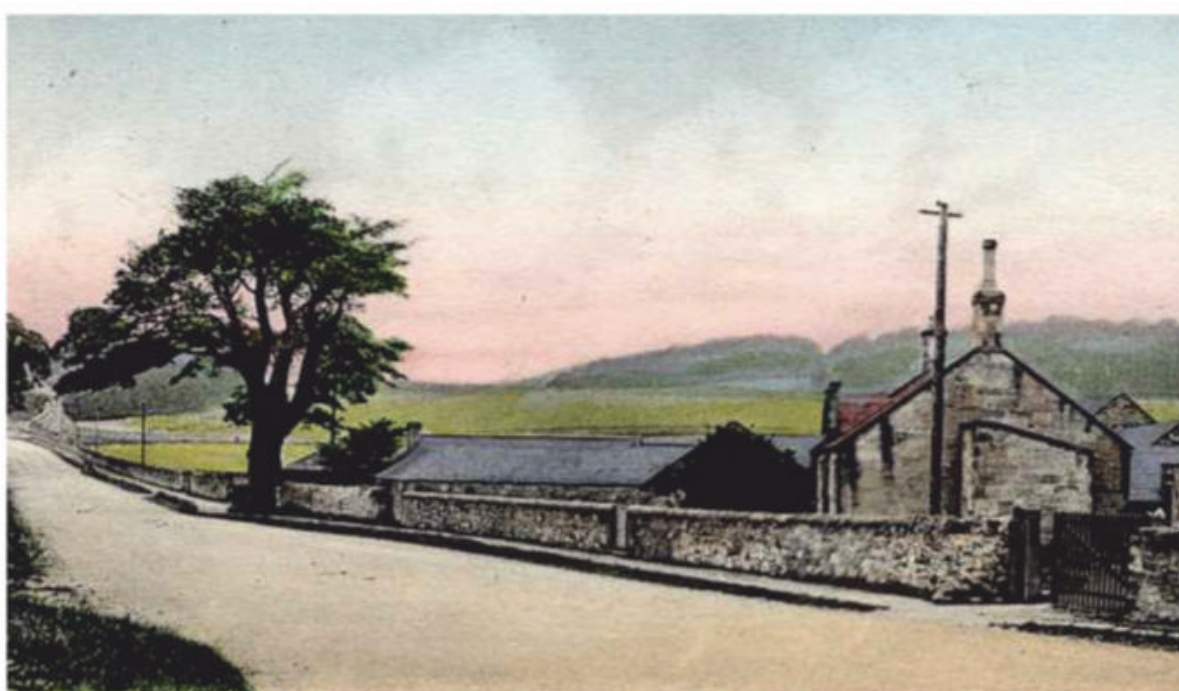
extended over the road into Mrs Fergie's wee coo park.⁵ The iron railings erected at the order of Queen Victoria were still there, along with a plaque saying that the tree had been planted by Mary Queen of Scots about 1561. Tourists from all over the world still came to see it, and there were saplings at Windsor and Balmoral. When featured by the *Fife Herald* in 1939, the old tree was still alive and in reasonable health, but in 1953, it was in an advanced state of decay: only a stump about 10ft (3m) high remained inside the iron railings.⁶ The plaque was later stolen, and Queen Mary's Tree was finally removed in 1975; calls from traditionalist Scots to have another tree planted on the site were ignored, and the site was soon covered with scrubs and brambles.⁷ As expressed by a Caledonian 'old poet':

*The storms o'time had tried thee sair,
But thou was propt wi' canny care;
And nae rude hand would ever dare
To injure thee,
Till death's fell blast laid low and bare
Queen Mary's tree.*⁸

The legend of Queen Mary's Tree being planted by the tragic queen's own hand is substantially flawed. Firstly, the only time



LEFT: Phillimore's card depicting Queen Mary's Tree. ABOVE: A postcard posted in 1908, showing Little France and Queen Mary's Tree. BELOW: Craigmillar Castle and the tree, from *Cassell's Old and New Edinburgh*. BOTTOM RIGHT: The tree in the *Edinburgh Evening News*, 17 May 1924. BOTTOM LEFT: Another view of Little France and the tree.





TOP LEFT: The remaining Little France cottage off Old Dalkeith Road, clearly the same one depicted by Phillimore. **TOP RIGHT:** A cabinet card depicting Mary Queen of Scots. **ABOVE LEFT:** Queen Mary's Tree at Scone Palace, a postcard stamped and posted in 1908. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Queen Mary's Tree at St Andrews, a postcard stamped and posted in 1908. **BELOW:** Queen Mary's Pear Tree, from *Cassell's Old and New Edinburgh*.

she resided at Craigmillar Castle was in late 1566, after Rizzio had been murdered at Holyrood; thus, both the story that the tree was planted as early as 1561, and the account that Rizzio witnessed the planting, must be false. Secondly, and more importantly, it was a popular pastime in Victorian times to invent legends about particularly large and old trees. As a consequence, there are Queen Mary's Trees all over Scotland – at least 10 of them at last count, including a tree trunk kept in the museum of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland from as early as 1827, a famous hawthorn at Duddingston Manor that fell in a storm in 1840, a thorn in St Mary's College grounds in St Andrews, two



yews at Castle Cary, a yew tree at Crookston Castle near Glasgow (now long gone), a pear tree at Merchiston Castle that was looking decayed already in Victorian times, and a thorn at Hillhousefield, North Leith.⁹ Queen Mary's Thorn used to grow in the gardens of Moray House, and Queen Mary's Tree at Scone Palace, Perth, was still standing in Edwardian times; yet another Queen Mary's Tree, a chestnut at Cumbernauld Castle, was in the running to become Scotland's Tree of the Year in 2014, but managed only fifth place.¹⁰ It would have taken a frenzied effort from Scotland's tragic queen to pull off such an arboricultural tour de force; in reality, she is not recorded as planting so



ABOVE: Queen Elizabeth's Oak, Hatfield Park, in a postcard stamped and posted in 1904.

much as a tulip.

Although the fraudulent association of large and ancient trees with various royal personages appears to have had its epicentre in Scotland, there are some pseudo-royal trees in the heart of England too. The Queen Elizabeth Oak in Hatfield Park (wholly decayed today) is said to have been the tree beneath which she was sitting when she learnt of the death of Queen Mary; an unlikely scenario, considering that her predecessor had died in November. Of Dick Turpin's Oak in East Finchley, behind which the celebrated highwayman is said to have hidden when he robbed the mail in 1724, only a stump remains. The Wilberforce Oak, at Holwood House, Keston, where the celebrated anti-slavery campaigner once debated with Pitt, has also been lost to decay. Cowper's Oak near Olney, under which the poet is said to have taken shelter from the Sun, is dead and gone today, although the name survives as a pub nearby. There might actually be some truth in the story of the Royal Oak at Boscobel House, in which the future Charles II took refuge from the Roundheads, although the oak itself is long gone.

In Victorian times, there was a nostalgic desire to associate large and ancient trees with some attractive historical character

and to provide a living link from the present to the past. The many Queen Mary's Trees in Scotland are the most striking instances of this, and the one at Craigmillar was the most famous of them all. The tourist trade appears to have been a secondary by-product of this arboreal romanticism, although the income from visitors to the historical tree, and the sale of picture postcards, must have been welcomed by the Scots, who valued an influx of capital from south of the border, then as well as now. Modern Edinburgh is known for its conservationist approach to historic buildings and monuments, and it is strange and blameworthy that no concerted effort was made to save Queen Mary's Tree at Craigmillar during its period of decay, or at least to plant another tree on the site. Today, the area adjacent to Little France has been taken over by the newly erected Royal Infirmary, and the rural road frequented by shepherds and their sheep in Phillimore's time is now the busy Old Dalkeith Road, where howling ambulances frantically race for the hospital emergency department. It would take the imaginative mind of a close student of Elliott O'Donnell's *Trees of Ghostly Dread* (see 'Ghostwatch', p16) to believe that on foggy autumnal nights, when even the busy hospital sleeps, the spectral branches of a mighty sycamore can still be perceived,

dwarfing the remaining cottages in Little France...

This is an edited extract from *Phillimore's Edinburgh* (Amberley Publishing, 2018).

FOOTNOTES

- 1 *Greenock Advertiser*, 23 Sep 1881.
- 2 *Globe*, 21 Aug 1886; *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 27 Aug 1886; *Nottingham Evening Post*, 31 Aug 1886.
- 3 *Southern Reporter*, 3 Feb 1887; *Falkirk Herald*, 2 Oct 1886, *Linlithgowshire Gazette*, 7 Mar 1896.
- 4 *Scotsman*, 20 Oct 1892.
- 5 *Edinburgh Evening News*, 17 May + 6 June 1924; *Scotsman*, 24 May 1924.
- 6 *Fife Herald*, 6 Sep 1939, CANMORE records online.
- 7 *Edinburgh Evening News*, 19 Dec 2009.
- 8 'Elegy on Queen Mary's Hawthorn Tree', *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 June 1840.
- 9 *Standard*, 16 Oct 1827; *Bristol Mercury*, 13 June 1840; *Fifeshire Advertiser*, 24 Jan 1948.
- 10 *Caledonian Mercury*, 30 Mar 1859; *Fifeshire Advertiser*, 24 Jan 1948; *Scottish Daily Mail*, 8 Sep 2014, *Scotsman*, 31 Oct 2014.

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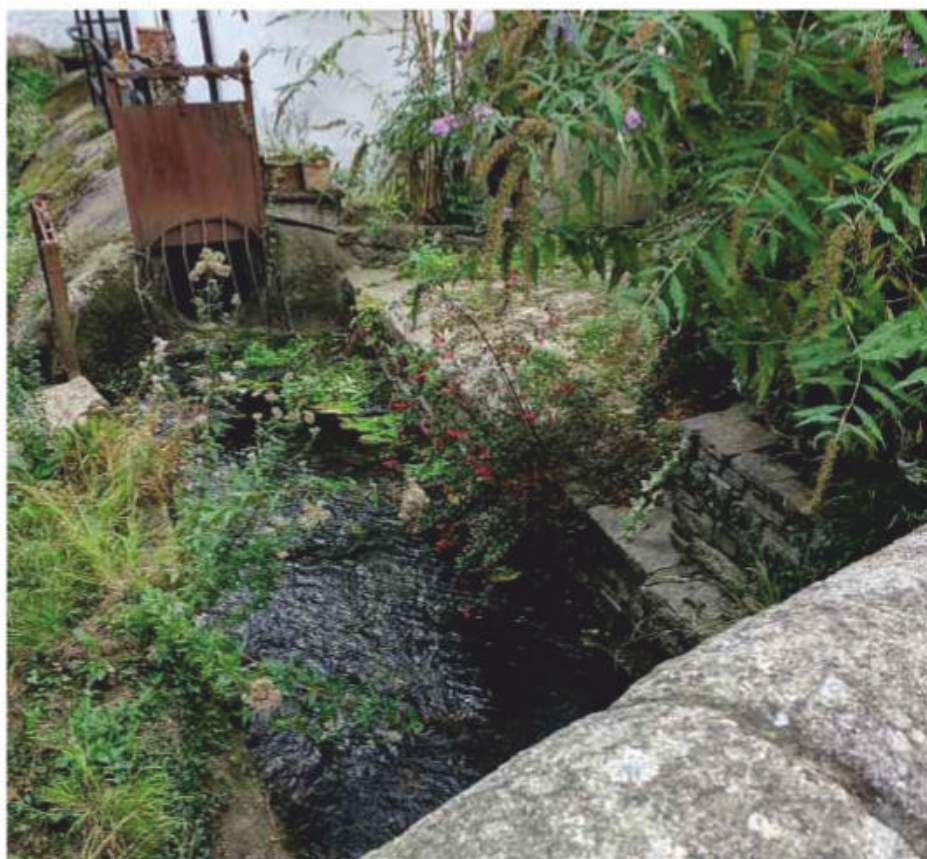
Something nasty in the water

Be careful crossing the King's Bridge in the Devon town of Ashburton, warns **KATE FIRKS**. Cutty Dyer may be lurking beneath it.

The B3212, the old turnpike road that runs from Princetown to Moretonhampstead, is the haunt of the fabled 'hairy hands', and there are many other eerie places on Dartmoor that are associated with ghostly goings-on, from phantom horsemen to headless ghosts (and even a headless goat). The moor, a mostly uninhabited expanse of 368 square miles (653km²) that feels bleak and windswept even on a sunny day, naturally lends itself to unsettling stories of strange phenomena that are bound to unnerve the weary or unfamiliar traveller. But the small towns that fringe Dartmoor have interesting tales of their own. Cutty Dyer lives in Ashburton, a bustling stannary town on the southern edge of the moor. Inhabited as early as 500 BC, this place was once a centre for the tin-mining industry and remains the largest town within the National Park.

The dreaded Cutty Dyer lives on the banks of the River Yeo, now called the Ashburn. The Ashburn has been rather tamed by a flood prevention system created in the 1970s, which has prevented some of the spectacular flooding events of the past but has not entirely solved the problem. This small river is a tributary of the much more powerful Dart. It has long been said that once a year the Dart demands a human life ("River of Dart, Oh River of Dart! Every year thou claimest a heart") and, unfortunately, the bigger river continues to take lives, most recently that of a young kayaker in 2017.

Cutty prefers a quieter place. One of his favourite haunts is the King's Bridge in the centre



ABOVE: Cutty's lair – a view of the Ashburn from the King's Bridge in Ashburton.

of Ashburton, next to the town hall. Cutty is tall, with large red eyes like saucers, and tries to pull naughty children – and drunks – into the water. Sometimes throats are slit, and blood is drunk, still-warm. Cutty may be a sprite, but he could also be a huge ogre: no one seems to have got close enough to be quite sure. What is known is that, unlike many water faeries, he is far from harmless.

Francis Pilkington noted that Cutty may be an abbreviated form of St Christopher.¹ There seems to have been an image of this saint near some stepping stones that crossed the river, and churchwardens' accounts for 1536 and 1538 show entries regarding a local image of Saint Christopher. Pilkington postulates that this Christian figure was introduced to ward off the effects of the pagan water sprites. This echoes PFA Amery's theory, dating from the late 19th century, that an image of St Christopher may have been cast into the brook during the Reformation.² Over time, the patron saint of travellers, who once carried the Christ Child across a river, oddly became the

diabolical ogre-sprite 'Cutty' (or 'Kutty'). Half a mile above the town there is a bridge across the water called Cuddyford Bridge, which could indicate an origin for the name or may reflect the local legend.

William Crossing, writer and chronicler of Dartmoor tales (and possible inventor of the pursuit of 'letterboxing'),³ recounted in some detail how Cutty, with his snakelike locks and shark's teeth, terrified two wayfarers who had strayed too close to the water. The terrifying creature, huge and hideous, stretched out his hand towards the two petrified men, who had the sense to stagger away from his grasp.

Like the troll lying under the bridge waiting for his next goaty meal, it is likely that Cutty still sits and watches for careless youngsters or dizzy drunks to come his way; but children these days are too busy watching their screens indoors to notice him, and as most of the town's pubs are, sadly, long gone, he has not been seen much of late. However, older residents have not forgotten Cutty; they were warned as

youngsters of his predilections, and continue to be careful when crossing the river to get to the shops. Water will always be very dangerous for young children, after all, and it could be argued that Cutty functioned very well as a sinister, cautionary character, a kind of 'Spirit of Dark And Lonely Water' (see **FT354:30-37**) for the many pre-TV generations.

In England, Cutty has similarly ugly and terrifying northern cousins in Jenny Greenteeth, Nelly Longarms and Peg Powler. There is a distant relative in Sicily, the Marabacca, who lives in wells and reservoirs and who also frightens children who stray too near the water's edge. What is unusual about Cutty Dyer, however, is his penchant for drunken folk. As the little town once hosted as many as 14 licensed premises it is perhaps surprising that he was not seen rather more often. Crossing notes in his *Folklore and Legends of Dartmoor* that the two men who had encountered Cutty on that dark night were certainly traumatised by their experiences. So shocked and bewildered, in fact, that one was found the next morning fast asleep in a cucumber frame; the other was upset enough to have assaulted the local constable to the extent that he ended the night in the local lock-up.

¹ Francis Pilkington, *Ashburton, the Dartmoor Town*, 1978.

² PFA Amery, *Reports and Transactions of the Devonshire Association for the Advancement of Science, Literature and Art*, Vol 10, 1879.

³ Letterboxing is a hobby that involves walking across Dartmoor using clues and grid references taken from a Letterbox Catalogue. Participants look for boxes that contain a rubber stamp and visitor's book. See W Crossing, *Folklore and Legends of Dartmoor*, 1914; reprinted 1997.

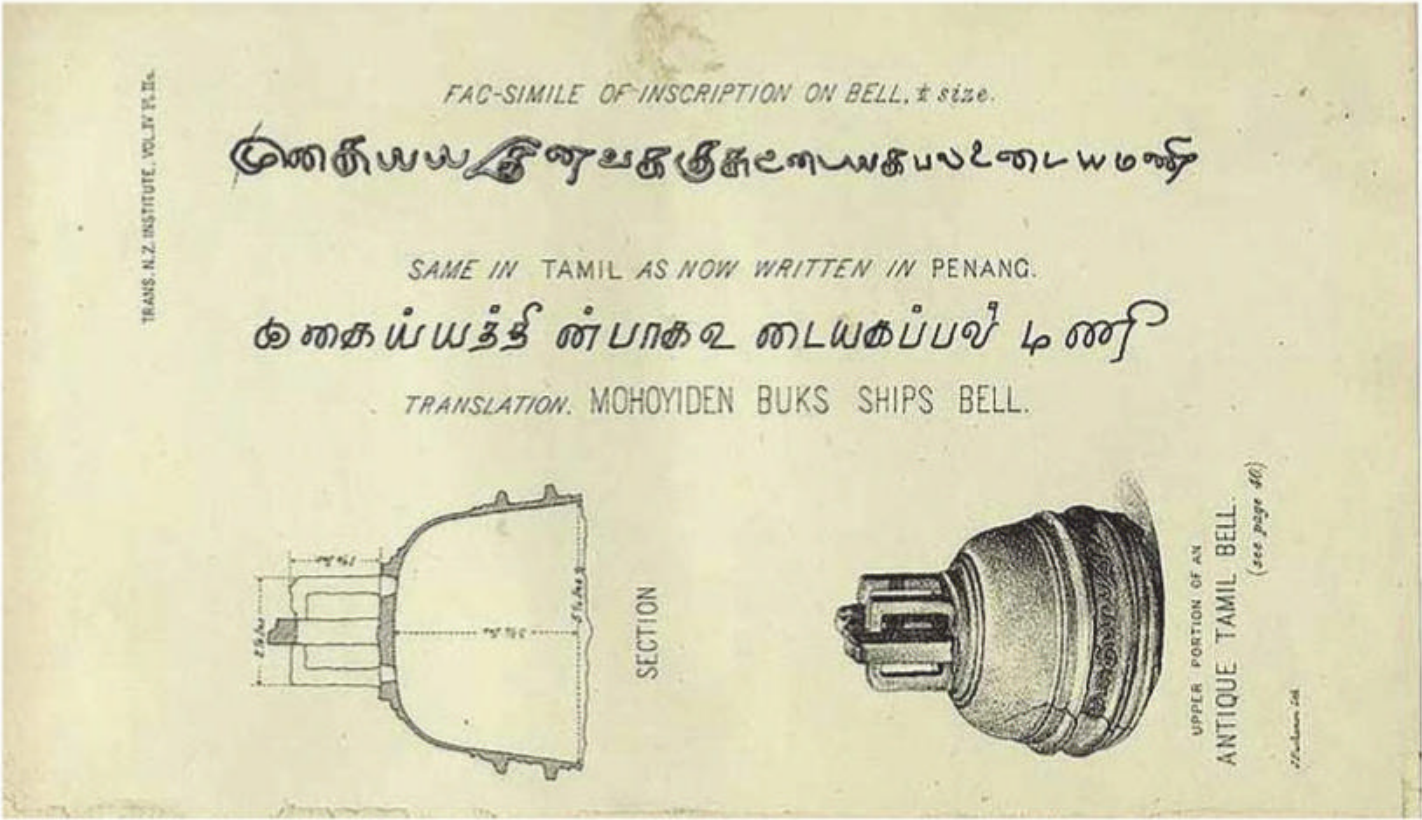
◆ **KATE FIRKS** works in Higher Education in the South West. She has an interest in the folklore and archaeology of Devon and Cornwall.

Charles Fort down under

IAN JAMES KIDD shares three newly unearthed Fort letters from antipodean newspapers

During his lifetime, Charles Fort lived mainly in New York and London, then, as now, two of the busiest cities in the world. By nature, and of necessity as a devoted researcher, Fort was a hermit, mostly solitary – as his wife Anna explained, he “did not want anyone to come in, and he did not want to go out.”¹ Indeed, the only visitors were Fort’s very few close friends, mainly literary figures, like Theodore Dreiser and Benjamin De Casseres. But a lack of guests does not mean that Fort had no contact with people, since, from the publication of *The Book of the Damned* onwards, he enjoyed an extensive correspondence with admirers and newspapers. In the Charles Fort Papers at the New York Public Library, many of these letters are saved, with correspondents contributing their own clippings; one letter begins, “You have me doing it!”

These “clipsters” were responding to Fort’s letters to newspapers, which invariably contained appeals to readers for more “data”. In recent years, researchers like myself have searched newspaper databases and archives for these letters. A few issues ago, I wrote up three by Fort to the *New York Times*.² Others have been made available by the diligent Canadian researcher, Mr X (his legal name). In my last piece, I asked *FT* readers to search for other letters in their own local or national newspapers. To my delight, reader David Marcus sourced three letters written by Fort to Australian newspapers, available at the National Library of Australia’s online database.³ One of them, “From outer space – or where?”, replays one



LEFT: The Tamil Bell, discovered in 1836. Fort speculated that the inscription might be of extraterrestrial origin.

of Fort’s favourite themes – extraterrestrial communication with the Earth – which was also the subject of the letters to the *New York Times*.⁴ Interestingly, this letter also discusses the Tamil Bell, discovered in 1836 in New Zealand’s North Island, named for a strange feature – an inscription written in old Tamil, dated to the 1300s, long predating any known contact between India and the south Pacific islands. Fort wondered if the script was not perhaps extraterrestrial, inviting any informed readers to weigh in. (The bell currently resides in the Museum of New Zealand, Te Papa Tongarewa.)⁵

The other two letters broach a different topic: sea monsters. The first appeared in the *Brisbane Courier* in May 1925, under the bland title “Marine Animals”.⁶ Following Fort’s usual format, it begins by explaining his ongoing project of “collecting data upon reported monsters in the sea”, noting a shift away from reports conforming to the “traditional sea serpent” type. Wasting no time, Fort moves straight to a double whammy, proposing

“Creatures from other worlds... have fallen from the sky...”

the existence of “enormous, unknown” sea creatures that are mammalian, but not cetacean, before suggesting that “there may be unknown, habitable lands upon this Earth”, perhaps the dry-land refuges of these creatures. If not in the Arctic or Antarctic, argued Fort, these places must be “completely undiscovered” and perhaps not on this Earth.

True to form, Fort’s letter appealed to published reports of carcasses of unknown sea monsters found washed up on beaches around the world, such as an alleged 47ft- (14m) long “white-haired animal” with a 5ft (1.5m) proboscis found on a South African beach in 1924. No remains were kept as evidence, although Fort also noted a report of a similar “proboscidean”,

about 40ft (12m) long with an 8ft (2.4m) snout, that was found in Queensland in 1883. Witnesses to the skeleton reported a thigh bone and respiratory tracts in the snout, suggesting it was not any known type of whale.⁷ Interestingly, its remains were kept and taken to the anatomical collection by the Colonial Treasurer, where they were identified as the vertebræ, ribs, pelvis, and portions of the skull of a young humpback whale. But Fort’s alarm bells started ringing, since the identification is contradicted in the same report, which ends with the breezy remark that, given the “imperfection of the skull in its most important points, it cannot be satisfactorily identified” with *Megaptera novaeangliae*, the humpback whale, which, after all, does not have a proboscidean snout.⁸

Following inductive method, Fort reasoned that if the creature was not any known marine species, nor traceable to any known “monster-inhabited lands” on Earth, then there is at least the possibility that “creatures from other worlds,

perhaps from planets which may not be millions of miles away from this earth, have fallen from the sky into this earth's oceans". Although the oceans were, then as now, largely unexplored, Fort invited readers to take the idea seriously. Perhaps he was playing with the notion that interplanetary efforts at communication might involve gigantic aquatic creatures as emissaries, rather than inscribed artefacts. Since that seems an odd means of starting a conversation, a more promising reading is that the letter was an early instance of Fort's famous idea of teleportation. Six years later, *Lo!* introduces it as a natural phenomenon, "a means of distribution of things and materials", including living creatures. Teleportation once operated in life throughout the Universe, then became vestigial, operating erratically, causing falls of fish, frogs and other beasts from the sky.⁹ Perhaps the mystery proboscians were inadvertently teleported into the Earth's seas, either arriving dead or dying soon after, which would explain their lack of known terrestrial habitats and relatives?

The second letter, 'A Sea Monster', appeared in *The Mercury*, of Hobart, Tasmania, in August 1926, opening with the curt complaint that "the scientific world is not hospitable to stories of new animals".¹⁰ After the usual reports of unidentified and new creatures, Fort recounts an April 1913 sighting at Macquarie Harbour, a large navigable inlet on the west coast of Tasmania, of an "extraordinary animal", 15ft (4.6m) long and somewhat like a seal. It had a thick neck, a furred and barrel-like body, no definite tail or fins, and four distinct legs. Indeed, once the creature realised it was being observed, it apparently "bounded" away with "most un-seal-like" motions, leaving definitive footprints, showing four claws. This 'Conder Seal', as it later became known, was witnessed by two employees of Hartwell Conder, a Tasmanian State Mining engineer, in 1913.¹¹ In a nicely forteen touch, Conder laconically remarked that, while



LEFT: An illustration of a fearsome bunyip by C Douglas Richardson, 1900.

"the humourists have enjoyed themselves at the expense of the men", the properly scientific response would be to seek out similar reports.

Cryptozoologically literate readers will recognise this creature as a bunyip, an aquatic or amphibious creature from Aboriginal mythology.¹² The Tasmanian press took to describing it this way, although Fort never used the term, to my knowledge, since he deliberately steered clear of mythology. The best sources, in his view, were scientific periodicals, at least for their authoritative reputation, although they also tended to be exclusionary, a point central to *The Book of the Damned's* attacks on "dogmatic science". Second best are sightings and reports by contemporary witnesses, to whom Fort dutifully wrote, seeking confirmation and further details. In the case of the 'Conder seal', a letter was dispatched to

Conder, who replied, confirming the accuracy of the published description and affirming it was definitely not a seal, given the way it "bounded" along the beach.¹³

By the time Fort came to write up his data on sea monsters, he enjoyed a global audience, especially among Anglophone nations. *Lo!* is peppered with references to various correspondents who offered data, corrections, and, less often, theories of their own. At one point, Fort quips that he had "an extensive, though one-sided correspondence, with people who may not be, about things that probably aren't."¹⁴ No doubt many letters were ignored, too, since not everyone would take kindly to a private researcher into anomalous phenomena. But many people did write back, often with detailed, encouraging letters, as those kept in the *New York Public Library* attest.

Moreover, their reports often found their way into Fort's books, confirming his sense that more data might be obtained outside the scientific periodicals. It seems that few of these correspondents thought Fort took his "yarns" seriously – like the one in the *Brisbane Courier* letter about extraterrestrial sea monsters raining down on this Earth from nearby worlds. Most wanted to report what they saw, and, if possible, to try and make sense of it as best they could, and a few even got caught up in Fort's enthusiasm – like the one who found himself "doing it", too, trawling his daily papers for "damned" data. These epistolary investigations show us that even though the "hermit of the Bronx" had few visitors, he had a full mailbox and a world of correspondents.

NOTES

¹ Interview with Anna Fort, conducted by Theodore Dreiser, Sep 1933.

² 'Messages from Mars and more', **FT361:54-55**.

³ <https://trove.nla.gov.au>.

⁴ Charles Fort, 'From outer space – or where?', *Auckland Star*, 14 Oct 1926, p18.

⁵ Brett Hilder, 'The story of the Tamil Bell', *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 84, 1975, pp477–483.

⁶ Charles Fort, 'Marine animals', *Brisbane Courier*, 7 May 1925, p14.

⁷ Fuller descriptions are given in the *Brisbane Queenslander*, 3 Mar 1883, p328 and 2 Sep 1882, p30, and the *New Zealand Times*, 19 Mar 1883, p2.

⁸ 'Brisbane Museum', *Brisbane Courier*, 7 Mar 1883, p5.

⁹ See *Lo!*, part 1, chapter 4.

¹⁰ Charles Fort, 'A sea monster', *Mercury* (Hobart, Tasmania), 21 Aug 1926, p4.

¹¹ "Not a fairy tale" – Strange animal on the Tasmanian coast', *Journal* (Adelaide), 26 May 1913, p4.

¹² 'Great Lake bunyip', *Examiner* (Laurenceton, Tasmania), 8 May 1929, p11.

¹³ See *Lo*, part 1, chapter 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

♦ IAN JAMES KIDD is a philosopher at the University of Nottingham with a longstanding interest in Fort's life and work. His website is <https://ianjameskidd>.

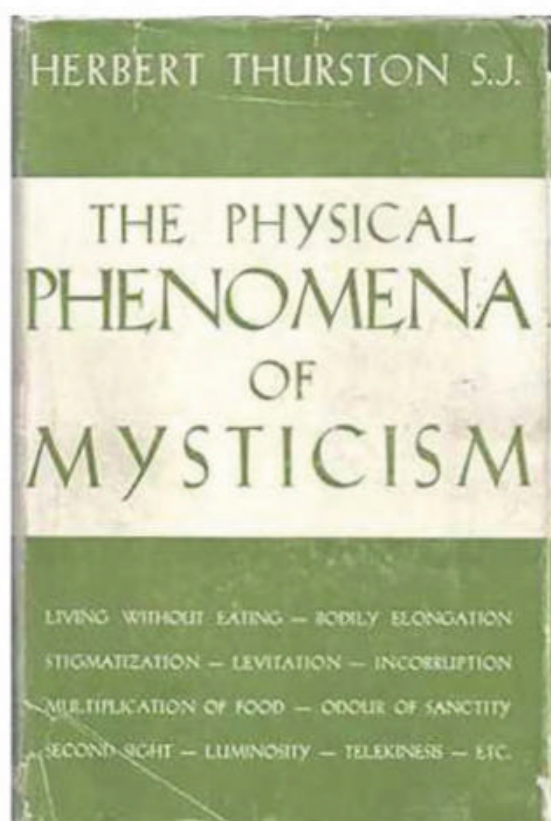
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40. YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A SAINT...

Say "Roman Catholic Church", and all sorts of images and associations spring to mind – rich vestments, incense, elaborate ritual, a panoply of saints, magnificent cathedrals – but not all of them are admirable or seemly, unfortunately. Murderous, large-scale persecutions such as the Inquisition, the Crusades, and witch-hunting still leave a nasty taste in many mouths. On the other hand, it has to be recognised that the Church is a human institution, inevitably prone to error and even sin. With this in mind, narrow the focus a bit and say "Jesuit", and you probably get an image of a somewhat ascetic intellectual, prone to casuistry and devious theological logic-chopping, and perhaps a bit too fond of wielding the tawse. What you *don't* anticipate is a member of the Society for Psychical Research, prepared to wonder out loud if the feats and miracles attributed to the saints are peculiar to them, and signs of divine power – or are also found among the laity, and may be more mundanely generated. Such an unexpected, borderline-heretical character was Father Herbert Thurston, *Societas Iesu* (1856–1939), a prodigious scholar of both hagiography and spiritualism. His sympathetic interest in the latter did not burden him with too many ecclesiastical friends. A fortean before his time?

In *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, Thurston surveys his chosen field nothing if not methodically, working his way through the well-known saintly wonders: levitations, stigmata (a long section of this long chapter is devoted to Padre Pio), the odour of sanctity and *post-mortem* incorruption, bodily elongations, and the capacity to go without eating much more than a daily communion wafer, sometimes apparently for years on end. He also deals with other saintly phenomena with which one may be less familiar: nuns who 'grew' fleshly, rash-like wedding bands as a sign of their espousal to Christ, saints who brightened their surroundings with the radiant light of their countenance, incombustible 'human salamanders', psychokinetics who consumed the host *and* sometimes half a chaliceful of communion wine without coming near said holy objects, saints who remained supple or continued to bleed after death, those who could see without using their eyes, and those who (*à la* miracle of the loaves and fishes) would feed a multitude on what started out as meagre rations. Where he can, Thurston offers secular examples of the same phenomena. If it's not too much of a plot-spoiler, his general conclusion is that what the saints and the beatified and other devout persons manifested is not unambiguously 'supernatural', his tactful word meaning 'divinely powered'. On several occasions he refers to himself wryly as the devil's



advocate (*promotor fidei*), and on others reminds us that the kind of phenomena he describes have never by themselves been regarded as sufficiently wondrous, or even very obviously righteous, to qualify their manifestors for beatification or canonisation. Less *outré*, albeit necessarily heroic, demonstrations of virtue were required, as well as two or three miracles (e.g. of healing) of a 'conventional' nature. Not that a spot of levitation, radiance, incorruptibility or whatever did anyone's reputation any harm.

Yet perhaps it was Thurston's less than wholesale commitment to the Church's preferred version of events that delayed publication of the book – which was clearly written around 1932–3 – until 1952, although there was a war on some of the time. We've been unable to find out for sure; any enlightenment from our erudite readership would be welcomed. What the powers-that-were could hardly object to was the quality of Thurston's research. Wherever possible he went back to the earliest accounts, preferably by contemporary acquaintances, or the evidence from the laborious quasi-legal process of examination. Not surprisingly, he's fond of quoting the *promotor fidei*'s deliberations.

A recurrent theme is the protestation and insistence of these wonder-workers that attention not be drawn to their pious wild talents. That would conflict with the requisite humility and modesty of their calling. Many were embarrassed or distressed, and strove to hide their stigmata or 'wedding bands', or swore their companions or confessors to secrecy. This all makes sense within the accepted frame of the vocational life. What's less obvious, and what Thurston takes for granted and consequently, frustratingly, doesn't explore, is why they wished so powerfully to identify with – and reproduce, constantly, in their own flesh – the sufferings of Christ: one might go further and question whether identifying with *any* aspect of Christ was exactly self-effacing, meek or modest. Presumptuous, is the word that springs to mind. Naturally, there is another, perhaps more powerful possibility. The intense, single-minded identification with the suffering (notably the Passion) of Christ can be seen as an attempt to partake in an ultimate abasement, a descent to the deepest attainable humility. That said, there is a somewhat sophisticated theological argument that links love and suffering: see for instance www.religious-vocation.com/redemptive_suffering.html for an exegesis, but be prepared to feel queasy. A recent saint is on record as writing "I wish to be inebriated with pain"; and at least one eyebrow levitates. Some psychologising interpreter may



LEFT: The incorrupt body of the stigmatic saint, Padre Pio, on display in the old Church of St Mary of Grace, San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy.

care to pigeonhole all this as an aspect of masochism. That isn't a question we feel qualified to explore, but *prima facie* it can't be casually dismissed.

It seems undeniable that a certain kind of character was drawn to this aspect of the religious life, where such propensities – or proclivities – were free to be indulged, and indulgently tolerated. So many of the people Thurston describes undergo (if that's the word) their peculiar experiences while in a religious ecstasy, otherwise known as a trance, or altered state of consciousness. These states are neither accessible nor attractive to everyone. As with other such marginal thoughts, Thurston doesn't dwell on the ramifications of his material. Whether this was the result of indifference, insensitivity, or an eye to the (dis)approval of his doctrinal superiors, scarcely matters: that such thoughts occur as one reads the book is a measure of its worth. If a book doesn't provoke thinking, it may as well be ripped up for bumfodder.

So can we, in the first place, trust the accounts here of what one might call the secondary miracles of the saints? Part of the problem here is that so many of these records are anywhere between 800 and 400 years old, and there's little guarantee, even among accounts close to the alleged events, that all concerned weren't keen to reinforce an agenda of the extraordinary. To be fair, that agenda may have been no more than a matter of people following their own sincere convictions or awed, faulty recall. Some of it may have been pious fraud, or honest memories thereof. And some is probably quite accurate – the appearance of 'wedding bands' on various brides of Christ seems well within the bounds of odd psychosomatic symptoms, for instance. Thurston's accounts are never less than interesting, but become more so the nearer to us in time they get. Consider the lengthy treatment devoted to Francesco Forgione, otherwise known as

“AMAZING WHAT
PEOPLE WILL
BELIEVE JUST
BECAUSE THEY
READ IT IN A
BOOK.”

Marty Rubin

Saint Pio of Pietrelcina or, more familiarly, Padre Pio (1887–1968). Thurston seems to have been unaware that in 1923 Forgione was forbidden to teach, because Pope Pius XI considered him a “a noxious Socrates, capable of perverting the fragile lives and souls of boys”, or that he admitted to taking money during confession, and was also forbidden to perform Mass in public; while the founder of Rome's Catholic university hospital, Fr Agostino Gemelli OFM, a physician and neuropsychiatrist, concluded that Forgione was “an ignorant and self-mutilating psychopath who exploited people's credulity”. Thurston therefore doesn't question the friar's holiness, but does intimate that he believes his stigmata (indeed all stigmata, apart from St Francis of Assisi's) were the product of suggestion. It's since been proposed that Forgione's stigmata were the product of severe, and no doubt painful, applications of carbolic acid, although the evidence is circumstantial.

Thurston's interpretation of paranormal wild talents, secular or saintly, is generous. He takes pretty much at face value the exploits of Daniel Dunglas Home, for instance. Although Home was never caught in the act, his mediumistic feats are all explicable, and Thurston concedes that

Home's most famous 'levitation', out of one window of Lord Adare's Pimlico apartment and in through another, 45ft (14m) above the pavement, may not have been what it seemed to the witnesses. Thurston also raises no objection to the mediumship of W Stainton Moses, which would leave him rather isolated these days. So, his trust in his secular sources leads him inevitably to conclude that his ecclesiastical ones do not describe especially blessed or divine talents, strange as they are. Even so, he is quite firm in his belief that “in the mystical state things really happen which are not reconcilable with nature's laws as commonly understood, and further that there is better published evidence of such occurrences in our hagiographical records than any which has yet been produced by Spiritualists.” Our own more cautious view would be that neither set of sources is exactly infallible, indeed far from it, and none of the marvels he examines may have happened as reported – or at all. Thurston indubitably made every effort to get hold of the most authentic accounts that he could, and can't be faulted on that score. Nonetheless a certain mist of ambiguity hangs over the whole book.

Thurston's great virtue is that he has gathered together an extraordinary compendium of weird manifestations from the cloistered life of several centuries. It's a dog-eared old forteen cliché, but one really does have to make up one's own mind about this stuff. And Thurston's other great merit is the clarity and readability of his writing. It has to be said that this is not always assisted by the recent White Crow edition, which is obviously reproduced from an OCR scan of the original, and hasn't been too diligently proof-read. So, for example, we read of an order of nuns called the Poor Glares. A crabby and resentful bunch of termagants? Or maybe they *wanted* to glare like sourpusses but just weren't very good at it? The Poor Clares, on the other hand, in our limited experience are a rather jolly lot, and surpassed for indefatigable cheerfulness only by the excellent Little Sisters of the Assumption who used to brighten up Ladbroke Grove long ago. One does wonder if these days good humour is a prime requirement of the modern religious novice, which in turn might account for the seeming paucity of wonder-working ecstasies in today's Catholicism. But then perhaps the Church doesn't want us to hear about them, if they exist. For those who want a pretty comprehensive guide to those that did exist, there are few, if any, more balanced than Thurston's.

Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, Burns, Oates & Washbourne 1952; White Crow 2013

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The revenge of alt archæology?

Alternative archæology has been around since the mid-18th century, but the mystical has lost ground this century to a more academic approach and emerges now in a paranormal subculture

Spooky Archæology

Myth and the Science of the Past

Jeb J Card

University of New Mexico Press

HB, 410pp, illus, refs, notes, ind, \$75.00, ISBN 9780826359650

Were *Fortean Times* ever to wish to serialise books, this could be one of them, as it could have been written for the magazine's readership. Though there might not be Dickensian queues at the quayside, faint for the next chapter, it would generate and maintain strong anticipation.

Jeb Card is one of archæology's 'Heaven Born' – a Maya scholar, but specialising in its less fashionable aspects, namely late Maya to early Spanish times, and on the southern edges of that 'culture', in small, beautiful El Salvador, with its volcanic landscape and society, with Tazumal amongst its few excavated sites. However, he also has a side interest, perhaps even a delight, in recording and critiquing alternative archæology, or rather its mid-18th to early 20th century origins. Sometimes within the text he is able to combine both passions as when musing, in micron-like detail, upon the discovery of 'new' continents like Mu.

This book, despite its somewhat misleading/ambiguous title, rather unattractive cover and distinctly non-glossy paper, may well be a popularisation of more formal tomes he has written/edited on the same subject (alternative archæology), and this is no bad thing. Certainly, popularisation when done well has tremendous force in illuminating truths as demonstrated by the masters, Asimov, Sagan, Feynman and Hawking, but with other 'masters', can do much damage.

The text takes up about two-thirds of the 400 pages and is followed by a needed and highly useful timeline (a crank's chronology), by footnotes and 75 pages of references with many of them dating from the 21st century. The (all too) few plates that break up the text include comforting mummies – and inevitably Stonehenge. The final chapter – 'The revenge of alternative archæology' – should perhaps be read first to give a comprehensive resumé before starting at the beginning and being immersed in the deluge of details that constitute most of the text.

His thesis is simple. Early antiquarianism was a mix of early scientific, but non-quantifiable, practices with soft smudged folksy edges (dowsing, lost scripts, automatic writing and an acceptance of myths as forgotten truths), combined with European Imperial triumphalism and secondhand (esoteric, always esoteric) Eastern mysticism under the spirited guidance of Madame Blavatsky. In her photographs she looks like Queen Victoria, and both were amused in later life by the company of a younger Indian man. Coincidence? Although academic archæology abandoned this mode of antiquarian research over a century and a half ago (1880–1890) in exchange for 'professionalisation', "with a handful of exceptions the mystical is not a significant force in 21st century archæology". It has never been lost in the commonly accepted public perception of archæology (and of geology too): "is that digging up mummies?". Tut tut!

Further he suggests that this sub-mystical antiquarian approach, dead-headed by

"Above all it is the 'sounds alike, is alike' and 'looks alike is alike' brand of archæology"

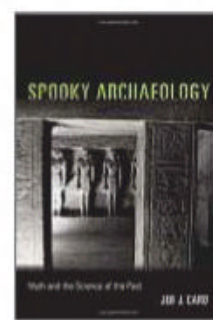
academia, has re-flowered in a "new media-driven paranormal subculture". This subculture has an alternative, antipathetic approach to mainstream archæology and, indeed, most science – perhaps even to formal education, as typified by the quotation "I don't have any [credentials] that is why I know something" (p260). This is leyline, hyperdiffusionism (one ultimate, ancient source of all knowledge skill and craft) often admixed with lost continents (Mu, Lemuria, Atlantis) or UFOs (think apes and pillars in Kubrick's *2001 A Space Odyssey*) and star alignments – the Orion's Belt three-star trick/trek, country. But above all it is the 'sounds alike, is alike' and 'looks alike is alike' brand of 'archæology' typified by the unification of Mesoamerican and Egyptian (and Bosnian) pyramids. What the book shows, in great, great detail, is that almost all these new New Age revelations are re-tricked out Victorian/Edwardian tropes or from early 20th century science fiction/fantasy. Seemingly, despite the changes in clothes and fashion accessories, the Zeitgeist remains unchanging. Does this mean there really is a 'deep truth' hidden, suppressed, overlooked by 'Dr Dryasdust' in his lifelong obsession with ancient pot typology? Alternative 'archæologists' would not

hesitate to answer yes... but so would Jungian psychologists.

The book is always readable but is a curious mixture and feels slightly unbalanced. Its modern popular cultural references are North American-centric. There is no mention of any British series, like the quite extraordinary *Bonekickers* (written by a well-known professional archæologist) or even the *Dr Who* forays into things ancient. Additionally, the usual and expected places (Egypt, with yet more Tutting; the Near East; Mesoamerica rather than the Andes, so no Machu Picchu; and a few European prehistorical sites) are explored but there is almost nothing from India and Southeast Asia or Oceania. This spatial cherry picking has more to do with what was happening around the early part of the 20th century than a possible lack of academic rigour. But surely there must be at least one Chinese puzzle out there?

Despite the modernity of the references, the book feels antiquated, with a light covering not so much of fairy dust (Victorian fairies flit throughout the text) as shedding of old talcum powdered skin. There is a far greater emphasis on the science fiction/fantasy/horror stories of HP Lovecraft, on Howard Carter and that tomb (there are some interesting graphs) than on post-2000 depictions of spooky archæologists. *Spooky* itself is not well defined but may include a clever secondary pun on spooks, for as chapter 'Time detectives and international intrigue' shows, between the Boer War and WWII, archæologists in both the Middle East and Mesoamerica, whilst

Continued on next page



Van the Man's legacy

Morrison, whose album was channelled, he claimed, was not the only muso to be drawn to New Age mysticism in Boston – yes, Boston...

Astral Weeks

A Secret History of 1968

Ryan H Walsh

Penguin Press 2018

Hb, 368pp, illus, ind, £18.99, ISBN 9780735221345

Most books about the hippie era focus on the usual urban suspects. Everybody knows that San Francisco, New York and Swinging London were where the happening people were partying and plotting revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But Boston? Even Chicago, the site of the notoriously riotous 1968 Democratic Convention, gets more attention. So it is startling to read *Astral Weeks* and learn about an often overlooked centre of countercultural activity of a still influential era when metaphysical concepts of revolution could take root even in an Irish Catholic city like Boston and future comedian Chevy Chase could play drums in a psychedelic band, Chameleon Church. The book bills itself as a “secret history”, but it’s not so much secret as forgotten, lying there in yellowed copies of *Crawdaddy* and *Rolling Stone*.

And how about Russell H Greenan’s *It Happened in Boston*, in which the protagonist attempts to contact God via occult ritual and murder? Its very title radiates incredulity at the idea that the city could be the focus for important, possibly otherworldly events. Yet Boston fervently embraced Spiritualism and was the birthplace of spirit photography. Strangely, when occult mysticism flourished again in the 1960s, the bohemians who were most immersed in it seemed to have been unaware of the city’s strong roots in esotericism.

Lou Reed and Van Morrison were influenced by Alice Bailey, who believed

that seven rays of energy influenced human behaviour. From childhood, Morrison experienced the sensation of floating while lying down, and claimed to have experienced “astral projections” and hallucinogenic journeys without the benefit of psychedelics. Morrison began the 1980s by making references to Bailey’s *Glamour: A World Problem* in songs, interviews and liner notes.

Lou Reed believed in the power of “white light” to heal and enlighten. The Velvets were supposed to be New York’s junked-out alternative to the California scene, but Reed’s



absorption in the theories of a New Age pioneer like Bailey show just how deep the mystical roots ran, influencing even the supposedly jaded heroin chic downtown crowd. The

Velvet Underground migrated to Boston, as did their hardcore fans, infiltrating its jeans-clad milieu in furs and velvet. Later, Reed would refer to Bailey’s work as “a dangerous set of books”. He said that one of his biggest mistakes was introducing Bailey’s works to Jonathan Richman, an impressionable fan just beginning a music career, who took Reed’s suggestions to heart. For instance, when Reed mentioned Bailey’s claim that insects were negative projections of the ego, Richman wrote a ditty called ‘Hey There Little Insect’.

Richman’s song was considerably less serious than Reed’s ‘Ocean’, in which he admits to being driven “crazy” by the notion that “Insects are evil thoughts, thought of by selfish men.” One suspects it was Reed who took Bailey’s work more seriously, and on whom strange metaphysical concepts had a more damaging effect.

The book’s publication

coincides with the 50th anniversary of Van Morrison’s *Astral Weeks* album. Describing it in terms that might be called automatic recording, Morrison claimed the songs were “channelled. They just came through”.

The recording sessions are interesting to read about, but might have been more so if Morrison didn’t come across like a rude jerk.

While Morrison was a musician who dabbled in mysticism, Mel Lyman was a harmonica player in a jug band who branched off into the mystical fringe, founding a communal ‘family’, which many likened to a cult. Did Lyman really die young, or was his death a hoax? Probably the former, but it’s an interesting story. Lyman’s Family deserve a book of their own, and perhaps one day we will get it.

From the darker side of the Boston scene came Albert De Salvo, who charmed his way into women’s apartments, and raped and killed them, earning the moniker the Boston Strangler. The most unnerving part of this story is the hint that he may have been taking credit for the work of a smarter psychopath he’d met in prison. As disturbing is the telling of the making of Frederick Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies* and the ensuing legal circus that resulted in the documentary’s suppression. On the less disturbing side of moviemaking, we get details of the Steve McQueen vehicle *The Thomas Crown Affair* and Antonioni’s counterculture study *Zabriskie Point*. This is a book that sends you to YouTube to look for old clips of David Silver’s topical TV show and of The Jim Kweskin Jug Band performing at folk festivals, even though you’ve probably never heard of them before.

Brett Taylor

★★★★★

Continued from previous page

excavating, ran parallel careers in spying, state manipulation (Gertrude Bell) and smuggling (for museums and private collections). Dr Card is correct: this is so close that Indiana Jones is less of a caricature (the crystal skulls fraud is discussed in detail) and more like plagiarism.

Card’s warning that the common misrepresentation of archæology and its usurpation by alternative archæologies needs to be professionally countered and not just ignored is more than academic. It is instructive to note that in Andy Burnham’s joyous book on the megalithic sites of the British Isles, *The Old Stones*, this mixture of alternative archæologies (less the colonialism but with many star alignments and even ritual dowsing) remains alive, albeit in the form of short vignettes largely separate from ‘professionalised’ archæology.

But who will perform this counter service? ‘If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas’ is an important and justified deterrent within academic circles. We should thank Jeb for his thick skin.

Despite Lovecraft, this is a book to read and reread.

Rob Ixer

★★★★★

One of Ten Billion Earths

How We Learn about Our Planet’s Past and Future from Distant Exoplanets

Karel Schrijver

Oxford University Press 2018

Hb, xii + 460pp, illus, refs, ind, £25.00, ISBN 9780198799894

The idea that our galaxy may contain billions of Earth-like planets is exciting. For many people, the excitement lies in the possibility that some of those planets may harbour intelligent life similar to ourselves. Others (myself included) are just as excited by the thought that even uninhabited planets are “strange new worlds” that visitors from Earth could explore in the not-too-distant future. Some people may even be excited by the prospect, touched on in Schrijver’s subtitle, that studying alien planets can teach us something about the Earth – although that sounds more like a politically correct



bid for a research grant than something that's going to fire the imagination of the general public.

The subtitle is only a minor part of what's in the book. It's actually an exhaustive survey of everything that's currently known, or suspected, on the whole subject of planets – the familiar ones inside the Solar System as well as the many recently discovered exoplanets around other stars. There are plenty of good things in the book, but Schrijver takes too long to get to them, meandering through sundry peripheral, barely relevant topics on the way. The end result is a book that's less exciting than it should have been.

Andrew May

★★★★★

Weird Fiction in Britain 1880–1939

James Machin

Palgrave 2018

Hb, 259pp, illus, bib, ind, \$84.99, ISBN 9783319905266

Weird fiction has undergone a resurgence in critical interest over the last few decades, largely driven by the rising popular and critical profile of HP Lovecraft. But a definitive definition of weird fiction continues to elude literary scholars. In *British Weird Fiction, 1880–1939*, James Machin looks at weird fiction's origins in the supernatural fiction of 19th-century Britain, as well as examining the ways in which definitions of the weird have always been awkward, defined as much by a culture of connoisseurship as by any specific criteria.

Machin begins with an overview of the late 19th century, including its publishing landscape, literary trends and the role of weird writers in critical understandings of the era. He pays special attention to the role of Decadence: weird fiction existed within this cultural context, but its relationship to Decadence as an artistic movement is complex. This section also discusses the relationship of weird fiction to short fiction as a form. From this beginning, Machin discusses five British authors. The first four

would be expected in a discussion of weird fiction: MP Shiel, Arthur Machen, Count Eric Stenbock and R Murray Gilchrist. The fifth, however, is an unconventional choice: John Buchan, who, although better-known for thrillers, also blends aspects of the weird with adventure fiction.

From Britain, Machin moves to America, discussing pulp magazine *Weird Tales* and its associated fanzine, *The Fantasy Fan*. Machin demonstrates that both publishers and readers – some readers, at least – saw *Weird Tales* as being part of a literary tradition that dated back to the 19th century authors discussed in the early section of the book. Even from the beginning, then, weird fiction fans were engaging in the kind of connoisseurship that has come to define the genre in the modern day.

British Weird Fiction, 1880–1939 presumes familiarity with most of the work it discusses, and of 19th-century British literature in

general. Its real goal is to contribute to the ongoing discussion of weird fiction as a literary genre or mode. It's vital reading for anyone interested in the history of weird fiction as a genre, and interesting, if perhaps not essential, for students of Victorian and modern literary and popular culture.

James Holloway

★★★★★

Devoted to Death

Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint

R Andrew Chesnut

Oxford University Press 2018 (2nd ed)

Pb, 244pp, illus, ind, £18.99, ISBN 9780190633332

The 2012 first edition of *Devoted to Death* by professor of religious studies Andrew Chesnut was the first academic study of the Santa Muerte phenomenon. Originally a Mexican folk saint, her cult is now international.

This new edition is the result of five years' travel, during which Chesnut conducted in-depth field work to follow up some unanswered questions in the original edition. He examines the related cults of Argentina's San La Muerte and Paraguay's Rey Pascual (also skeletal personifications of death, but male).

Santa Muerte may be

translated as 'Holy Death' as well as 'Saint Death', and this aspect is further developed. A good or holy death, at peace with God and surrounded by loved ones, is strongly rooted in Latin American Catholic cultures. Because of its decade-long drug war (which by 2016 had claimed over 100,000 lives), Mexico is a country where a violent, untimely death is an ever-present fear. For a deceased person's loved ones, Santa Muerte offers consolation; they entrust her to intercede on behalf of the departed to ensure a passage to Heaven (or, at least, Purgatory). To the living she brings hope of a good, relatively peaceful death.

The worldwide growth of the Santa Muerte cult over the past 15 years may be attributed to increased migration of Mexican and other Latin American peoples to the USA and elsewhere, but the rise of the Internet is also significant, as is disenchantment with orthodox religion (especially the Catholic church, with its recent scandals).

But devotees would argue that Santa Muerte's attraction lies in her efficacy; petitioners make requests, and she has a reputation for fast and reliable results.

Unlike some Latin American folk saints who were once living persons, Santa Muerte doesn't represent a specific human being. She is instead the personification of death itself. The universality of death is doubtless another reason for her worldwide popularity.

Although she has followers from all social classes, the majority, in Mexico at least, are from the urban working class. Amongst her non-Latino devotees, Euro-American millennials comprise the most common demographic.

Rather than having her roots in Aztec or other indigenous pre-Columbian beliefs concerned with veneration of the dead, Chesnut regards Santa Muerte as being predominantly European in origin. He cites mediæval Catholic skeleton imagery, specifically the Grim Reaper. Holy Week processions in Spain, exported to the New World to evangelise the indigenous Indians, would sometimes feature a Grim Reapress statue.

The Catholic Church has adopted a hostile stance towards Santa Muerte, seeing her as a rival. Her devotees light votive candles, and recite novenas or rosaries adapted from the traditional series of prayers addressed to the Virgin. During his tour of Mexico, Pope Francis condemned Santa Muerte as a "macabre symbol" of narco culture, emphasising her associations with the illegal drug trade and criminality.

Whilst it is true that as Saint Death she was once the patron saint of *narcotraficantes* and other criminals (DEA agents and Mexican police regularly find altars and other cultic paraphernalia during raids on dealers' homes), Santa Muerte has gone on to play other roles. She is a healer, a facilitator of romantic relationships, a lawyer and a guarantor of business success.

One of the appealing aspects of this book is, notwithstanding its academic and undoubtedly rigorous methodology, the author

hasn't sought an 'objective' position outside and above the phenomenon being studied. He evidently has great respect for his interviewees and their beliefs. In the spirit of 'participant observation' anthropology (as per Evans-Pritchard and his work with the witches and magicians of the Azande), more than once, Chesnut hints that he too has a personal relationship with Santa Muerte.

The introduction explains that there are two types of Santa Muerte devotees: some who actively seek her out, and others who receive an unexpected visit. Chesnut belongs to the latter category, and describes having been "beckoned by the Bony Lady", who, during a fallow period of another research project, one day "appeared on my laptop and summoned me to contemplate her."

Several books on Santa Muerte are now available; typically, manuals offering practical guidance on how to work with the Bald Lady in one's life. But *Devoted to Death* remains the only English-language academic work dedicated to the Skinny One. Recommended.

Christopher Josiffe

★★★★★





The SF and fantasy round-up

David V Barrett on a credible near-future Europe, a sideshow mermaid, a vanished university head, heresy, 9/11 (what *did* happen to Lil?), the wonderful Alan Garner and *Love and Rockets*

Europe at Dawn

Dave Hutchinson

Solaris 2018

Pb, 362pp, £7.99, ISBN 9781781086094

The Mermaid

Christina Henry

Titan Books 2018

Pb, 324pp, £7.99, ISBN 9781785655708

Gingerbread Children

Carol Carman

McCaw Press 2018

Pb, 374pp, £8.99, 9781999852306

Resonance & Revolt

Rosanne Rabinowitz

Eibonvale Press 2018

Pb, 374pp, £12.50, 9781908125514

An American Story

Christopher Priest

Gollancz 2018

Hb, 311pp, £20, ISBN 9781473200579

Where Shall We Run To?

Alan Garner

4th Estate 2018

Hb, 194pp, £14.99, ISBN 9780008305970

Three Sisters

Gilbert Hernandez

Fantagraphics Books 2018

Pb, 293pp, \$19.99, ISBN 9781683961147

Europe at Dawn brings Dave Hutchinson's Fractured Europe series to a satisfying close. Europe has fragmented into a myriad of small countries. Rudi would love to be running his restaurant, but is drawn back not just into being a *coureur*, taking people, packages and information across borders, but also into the hidden diplomacy between 'our' Europe and the pocket universe overlaying it. And is there a third, more dangerous player on the scene? Tensions rise and lives are disrupted through interweaving story strands. Hutchinson makes even his minor characters believable – while his vision of a near-future Europe seems all too likely.

Imagine PT Barnum had discovered a real mermaid, not a cobbled-together fish-monkey, and displayed her in his museum of the marvellous. Christina Henry tells the story of *The Mermaid* largely from her viewpoint, from her falling in love with a fisherman on the coast of Maine to her being gawked at swimming in Barnum's tank in New York. At times it's an horrific tale of greed, exploitation, titillation and prejudice, but it's told with such simplicity and warmth that you can't help falling in love with the mermaid.

Carol Carman's *Gingerbread Children* is humorous fantasy in the style of Terry Pratchett. Two stories interweave because of an ancient (and completely misunderstood) spell. When the matriarch of a university of magic dies, there's a struggle over her successor. The person who is appointed vanishes, as does a young child, and the dysfunctional senior faculty set out to search for both. Meanwhile a young student taking a creative writing course finds her pen taken over in a startling retelling of Hansel and Gretel. It's a delightful story, nicely written and full of excruciating puns.

I need to declare an interest: three years ago I published a story by Rosanne Rabinowitz in my anthology *Tales from the Vatican Vaults*. That tale of religious dissenters in early 15th-century Europe is included in her collection *Resonance & Revolt*. Several of the historical stories involve heretics; heresy is from a Greek word meaning "choice", and choosing one's own path, one's own beliefs, both religious and political, is at the heart of many of the stories. So is (perhaps much the same thing) seeing the world from a different perspective; in several

of the stories the viewpoint character sees and perceives things that others around her don't. Revolutionary religion and politics, music and art wind in and out of these fascinating stories.

Christopher Priest's novels often deal with uncertainty: uncertain events, uncertain memories. *An American Story* centres on the uncertainty about 9/11. Ben's fiancée Lil was killed in one of the planes – but of course her body was never recovered. She'd told Ben she was getting divorced from her husband – but when they meet, some years later, he hears a different story. As the novel progresses Ben, a journalist, begins to discover more and more anomalies – not just the many conspiracy theory questions about the plane crashes, but also in Lil's own story. Her ex(?)-husband is very senior in US defence; the US government quickly puts together an official narrative about 9/11 which doesn't always seem to fit the facts that Ben knows – or thought he knew. In a sub-plot he interviews a mathematician about the Thomas Theorem, which states that "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences". How much is the reality we think we know defined for us by others?

If you haven't read Alan Garner, go out now and buy *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, *The Owl Service*, *Red Shift* and the Stone Book quartet, just for a start. *Where Shall We Run To?* is Garner's recollections of his childhood in Alderley Edge, the setting of most of his novels. It's told in snippets, each anecdote just a few pages long. Like all memoirs it's recreated memory, but told with the immediacy of a child's voice: his friends, his childhood illnesses, his explorations of Alderley Edge with his father, his meetings

with wartime evacuees and American soldiers – and not all the memories end happily. This memoir offers an intimate insight into the early influences on perhaps the most British of all living writers, whose fantasies are deeply rooted in a very real northern landscape.

It's hard to believe that Los Bros Hernandez have been entertaining and intriguing us for over 35 years; Fantagraphics began publishing their *Love and Rockets* comic in 1982. The lives of their characters have developed over these decades – growing up, marriages, divorces, affairs, children, death – in a bewildering complexity of publications. By far the best way to follow the stories is the large-format omnibus library; *Three Sisters* is the 14th volume. (Warning: graphic [novel] sex!)

Some years ago Luba, the bathkeeper in Gilbert Hernandez's wonderfully populated Central American village of Palomar, moved to California and discovered her two half-sisters, Petra and Fritz. *Three Sisters* explores their interaction in their maturity, focusing mainly on Fritz (with her "high, soft lisp"), who gives up her career as a psychotherapist to become a B-movie star. *L&R* has always had occasional SF elements: in this volume aliens allow Luba to enjoy a few minutes of being in her twenties again, and to observe the sisters she didn't meet till many years later; Fritz's self-help guru ex-husband searches for the legendary sea-hog; and Fritz and others are kidnapped by a strange brotherhood to awaken their leader from a coma-like state. But at the heart of the stories, as always, are astonishingly real people who, whatever they achieve in life, have screwed-up relationships, jealousies and hang-ups, yet somehow triumph all the same.

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The nightmare before D-Day

Evil Nazis and their monstrous experiments make an over-the-top transition from computer gaming to the big screen in a film that delivers nearly as much fun as a game of *Wolfenstein*...



Overlord

Dir Julius Avery, US 2018
On UK release

"Once upon a time in Nazi-occupied France..."

So began Quentin Tarantino's 2009 feature *Inglourious Basterds*, a film that took substantial liberties with its depiction of certain WWII figures and events, kickstarting Tarantino's fixation with rewriting history for his cinematic antics.

Bucking the growing trend of portraying Nazis as multi-faceted characters – the men behind the monsters – Tarantino longed for the good old days where Nazis were portrayed as caricatures and the audience could experience a hearty sense of catharsis as these human monsters would get a fittingly violent comeuppance, be it at the hands of Richard Burton & Co. in *Where Eagles Dare* or via the wrath of God in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

Since the trend for humanising Nazis has seemingly strayed from the realm of cinema into society as a whole in recent years, the type of over-the-top, video game-

It's hard not to get carried away by the playful energy of the production

like depictions of their evil deeds in *Overlord* therefore comes at the perfect time for those who still perceive the Third Reich as giving birth to some of the most callous monsters to ever walk this planet.

Once the true nature of what is going on behind enemy lines is revealed, much like the anti-Nazi comics of the 1940s, *Overlord* proves to be silly, disposable fun, but it nonetheless offers the viewer a lighthearted, pop cultural release from the current political climate. That being said, the narrative of *Overlord* really is superficial, meaning that there are no heavy-handed allegories here to alienate audiences who just want to enjoy a tub of popcorn while a gorefest unfolds before their eyes. Instead, what may alienate some audiences is that *Overlord* is anything but your traditional war movie, not only

due to the story concerning itself with a wholly fictitious situation, but also due to its paranormal elements. Given those, a key segment of the film's target audience will be all those who have spent many gleeful hours blasting away Nazi abominations in games such as *Wolfenstein* and *Call of Duty*; while no direct association is made with the aforementioned gaming franchises, some gamers may feel they are finally seeing what a narrative based on such games could look like on the big screen.

While the film succeeds well enough on that level, it's not without flaws. It takes a while to get started, and during the quieter moments at the beginning, the drama is not overly convincing. This is mostly due to a reliance on clichés taken from better films, not to mention dialogue that feels somewhat forced due to its over-reliance on WWII movie stereotypes.

That being said, once *Overlord* kicks into gear and goes completely off the rails with its ludicrous plot, it's hard not to get carried away by the playful energy of a production where

everyone both in front of and behind the cameras clearly had a great time making a film that will thrill gorehounds, gamers and popcorn munchers with strong stomachs.

Placing itself somewhere between *Inglourious Basterds* and the Norwegian horror comedy *Dead Snow* in terms of both its ridiculousness and production values, *Overlord* is far from a masterpiece of the various genres it uses to tell its story. However, as a paranormal Nazi horror film, it delivers.

Leyla Mikkelsen



Poltergeist

Dir David Gilbank, UK 2018
Warner Bros, £12.99 (DVD)

As you may already have guessed, *Poltergeist* is aiming for the gangster-horror-comedy market, an off-the-beaten-track genre which is not overpopulated with quality product; or product of any kind for that matter. Unfortunately, director David Gilbank makes life difficult for himself in this regard by having to aim for three targets rather than one and, in this instance, is only 33 per cent successful.

Tariq (Sid Akbar Ali) and Boxy (Jamie Cymbal) are two dim-witted hoods from the north of England who find themselves in hot water with Uday (Pushpinder Chani), a psychopathic drug baron. They have been given the job of finding fellow hood Frank, who has disappeared with a pile of Uday's money, and only have four days to do it. The problem is that Frank's already dead, accidentally killed by Boxy during a previous interrogation as to the whereabouts of the loot. Increasingly desperate, the incompetents turn to a local woman who claims to have the ability to speak to the dead.

So that's your gangster-horror-



comedy bases covered then, with crime lords, voices from beyond the grave and bungling idiots. Actually, the claim that there is a horror element to all this is spurious because Frank's unquiet spirit isn't horrifying, and he certainly isn't a poltergeist. The plot device of an undead gangster is simply not enough to give the film the horror credentials it purports to have.

Where Gilbank gets it spot on is the gangster stuff, no doubt because that is clearly where his interest lies. He skilfully depicts a moribund northern town under the yoke of both petty and serious crime that seemingly infects the entire community. The criminals are shown to be idiots, but they're ruthless idiots. The machismo, violence and sadism which drives their world is brought starkly to life, despite the film's attempts to drape it in black comedy.

Indeed, it's because the crime element of the film is so spirit-crushingly believable that the comedy never really stands a chance: violence and inhumanity (and it must be said the unstoppable torrent of effing and blinding) isn't a great breeding ground for humour. Moreover, because the film is about moronic criminals, neither are there going to be any witty exchanges in the dialogue. Spending an hour and a half in the presence of such uniformly appalling people cannot be said to be a pleasant experience. I know it's a film and not a dinner party but at least the mobsters in *The Godfather* had some wisdom and sophistication.

Gilbank is to be commended for setting his film away from the London-centric milieu in which British crime films usually take place. He is also to be applauded for depicting a multicultural community, albeit one in which the various ethnic groups are all equally crime-ridden. He has an eye for detail and the photography by Chris Powell is excellent. I could have done with some more positive representations of women, but the film overall is more misanthropic than it is misogynistic. In the end, the extent to which you enjoy *Poltergeist* will almost certainly be determined by whether you think that title is hilarious or cringe-inducing.

Daniel King



THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! (www.theflicksthatchurchforgot.com)

Await Further Instructions

Dir Johnny Kevorkian, UK 2018

In cinemas and on demand from 7 December

A big family Christmas can be tense enough; but imagine waking up to find that every exit and window of your childhood home has been blocked by a strange black barrier. And that your only communication with the outside world is through the TV, which starts posting cold and silent instructions like "Stay indoors", "Strip and wash yourselves with bleach", and "One of you is infected. Isolate them". Three generations of a middle-class family desperately theorise about what might be happening. Is it a national disaster, an alien invasion or an elaborate reality TV prank? And does it even matter, when with every new instruction, survival becomes the only goal?

At its heart, *Await Further Instructions* explores authority and how humans react to it. Some, like the do-as-I-say patriarch Tony, reckon life works best with a clear chain of command. It's already a deep source of tension between him and his wayward son. So, when the TV takes charge, Tony obeys his invisible superior without question: bosses know best, after all. In turn, he expects his family to follow his lead until his son's new girlfriend take the opposite view. Leaders are not always benevolent, or even competent, therefore to mistrust those giving the orders may be the wisest move. The family's surname is Milgram – a not-so-subtle nod to the controversial Milgram experiments of the 1960s, in which subjects at



The film evokes the nuclear panic of 1980s Britain

Yale University ignored personal conscience to give painful, sometimes theoretically lethal, electric shocks to others: all on the instructions of the so-called 'scientists' in charge. Timid obedience really is a scary concept, and it's taken to its logical and frightening conclusion here.

While the concept's solid, the film itself isn't perfect. Some of the characters are a little too on-the-nose, like the nasty grandad or the pregnant daughter who's

always touchy. Poignant moments (like the Dad's moving monologue about his childhood) bring a vital human element to the story, yet for the most part, the Milgrams are always in 'bicker and shout' mode. You'll struggle to find any of them particularly likeable. Yet, perhaps this is another clever move on the filmmakers' part. Watching the film, you start thinking: surely humans can be better than this? Then the ending comes and you think: Whoah!

Setting the film in a single location – a suburban house – certainly adds to the claustrophobia, but the inventive photography and a pleasingly lush musical score elevate this indie effort and prevent it from feeling too small. This is good, since the film's themes are universal. Despite its philosophical ambitions, *Await Further Instructions* isn't an arty think-piece – it works as a straight-up sci-fi horror. It's tense, creepy and knowing too, with bonus points for evoking the nuclear panic of 1980s Britain. But the real star is the *Twilight-Zone*-style scenario, which not only makes for a gripping drama, but forces you to ask how you'd react in the same situation. How novel to have such a learning experience while watching a bloke have his fingers chopped off and an old man scrubbing his arse with bleach...





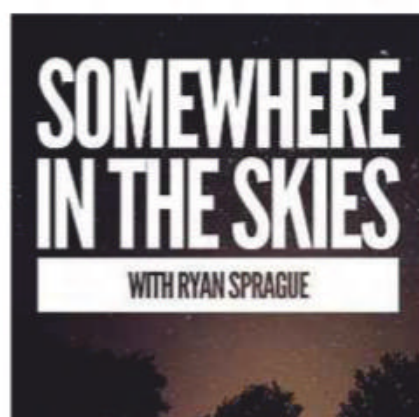
SOUNDS PECULIAR BRIAN J ROBB PRESENTS THE FORTEAN TIMES PODCAST COLUMN

As a medium, podcasts have been enjoying something of a boom over the past few years. The democratisation of quality media production through high-specification computer equipment has allowed a plethora of previously marginalised voices their own access to what were once quaintly called ‘the airwaves’.

In the past, broadcasting (reaching a wide audience from a single source) was heavily regulated and controlled, mainly through frequency scarcity: only those authorised or licensed to have access to the airwaves were allowed to broadcast. In UK terms that, initially, meant the BBC, with commercial stations coming along in the 1960s.

In terms of radio, there have been amateurs since the invention of the medium, reaching a crescendo with the offshore ‘pirate’ pop stations of the 1960s that ultimately led to the BBC launching Radio 1. For the longest time, Radio 4 (or NPR in the US) has been the default home of quality ‘spoken word’ content, whether that was drama, current affairs, or documentary radio.

Now, anyone with a microphone and an iPad, laptop, or computer and the right software can produce a decent podcast and launch their work onto a waiting world. Not all of them are good, while many are far better than you might expect, sometimes surpassing the productions of ‘legitimate’ broadcasters like the BBC or NPR. When it comes to fortean topics, there are a host of podcasts out there, ranging from the polished and compelling to the amateurish and downright weird. SOUNDS PECULIAR is your insider guide to the best of the current podcasts dealing with fortean topics: all you have to do is sit back and listen...



Podcast: *Somewhere in the Skies* (www.somewhereintheskies.com)
Hosts: Ryan Sprague
Episode Count: 75+
Format: Audio documentary, case histories, witness testimony, guest interviews
Established: April 2017
Frequency: Weekly
Topics: UFOs, ufology, aliens

Ryan Sprague’s *Somewhere in the Skies* ufology podcast opened with an immediately confrontational topic in its very first episode back in April 2017: media bias in UFO coverage. Sprague, joined by guest Richard Dolan, engaged with media coverage of flying saucers, from the earliest days of the first popular ‘flap’ of 1947 right through to today, tracing how things have changed. It’s an interesting choice for an opening instalment, and gets to grips with one of the big topics in the field – how its practitioners, as well as everyday ‘witnesses’, are

perceived by and presented in the media when discussing the possibility of Earth being visited by intelligences from another world. Dolan tackles ideas of ‘disclosure’ by governments, including the US, and the pollution of the mainstream media by ‘fake news’.

Sprague opens his debut episode by recounting his own personal UFO sighting experience, which took place over the St Lawrence River in upstate New York at the age of 12. The craft was one that’s classed as a ‘triangular’ UFO that “hovered silently over my head then headed north to the Canadian border”. Sprague was terrified by the sighting, but it led to an obsession in his adult years, a wish to ‘believe’, or at least a drive to uncover a reasonable explanation for what he had witnessed.

It’s not every podcast host who comes right out and recounts their very own ‘close encounter’ at the outset. Sprague’s search for answers led to his book *Somewhere in the Skies*, and it is from that book that the podcast spins off, picking up where it left off. The podcast, according to Sprague, intends to “discuss UFO cases old and new, discuss current UFO events from around the world, and hear from guests in various fields of study bringing us one step closer to asking

new questions and possibly even getting some answers”. In the over 75 episodes that have followed that mission statement, Sprague has pretty much stuck to his original intentions.

There are a host of ufology podcasts, and Sprague’s is one of the more accessible, open to newcomers as well as those already steeped in the subject. Many of his guests discuss specific UFO incidents or cases, such as Nick Redfern who (on the seventh show) delves deep into the granddaddy of all UFO crashes, the Roswell Incident. Redfern outlines his take on the case, arguing that the bodies discovered in the crash were those of Japanese POWs who were being used by the American military as test-flight victims.

Another familiar name is Mark O’Connell, who appears on the 10th episode to discuss his book *The Close Encounters Man*, about the life and career of J Allen Hynek. Episode 15 features David Jenkins, the creator of the American TV comedy *People of Earth*, which spoofs a well-meaning UFO experiencers’ group. Robbie Graham, author of *Silver Screen Saucers*, joins Sprague on Episode 31 to discuss how Hollywood movies have responded to the UFO mystery (he wrote an *FT* series on the same subject: see **FT225-228**). In Episode 38, Sprague tackles one of the biggest UFO

mysteries – the claims of Bob Lazar to have worked at Area 51 on a project back-engineering crashed saucers. Several episodes also deal with the recent revival seasons of that perennial UFO media favourite *The X-Files*.

The 50th episode is a special instalment that focuses on the career of Stanton Friedman, who explores his 40 years on the trail of flying saucers covering his memories, experiences, and theories. It’s an in-depth discussion that allows Friedman, on the point of retirement, to outline his life-long involvement in UFOs from many different angles. However, if you are looking for a good place to start (other than at the beginning), head straight to Episode 57, where Sprague interviews Harold Burt about his book *Flying Saucers 101*, which serves (as our host notes) as “a wonderful overview for newbies and a great refresher for veterans alike”.

Under the ‘About’ tab on the *Somewhere in the Skies* website, those curious about Sprague can find a collection of his radio interviews and podcast guest shots, where he talks about his life in ufology. It includes appearances on podcasts that Sounds Peculiar has already covered (such as *Mysterious Universe*) and a host of others we’ll no doubt get around to in the future...

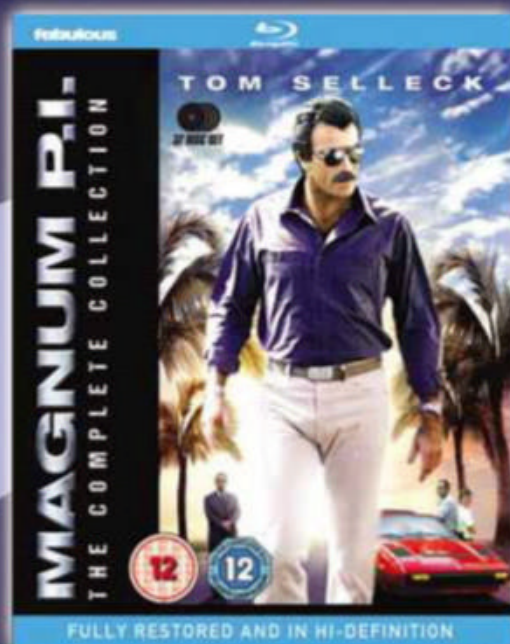
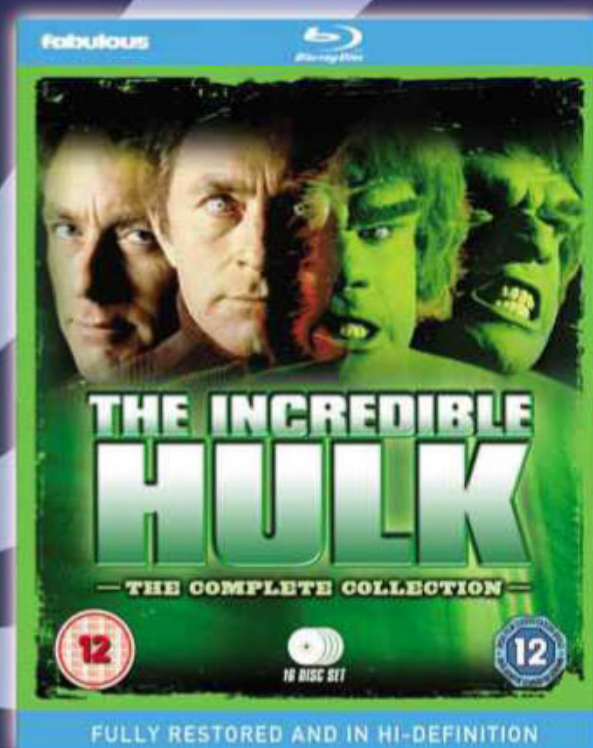
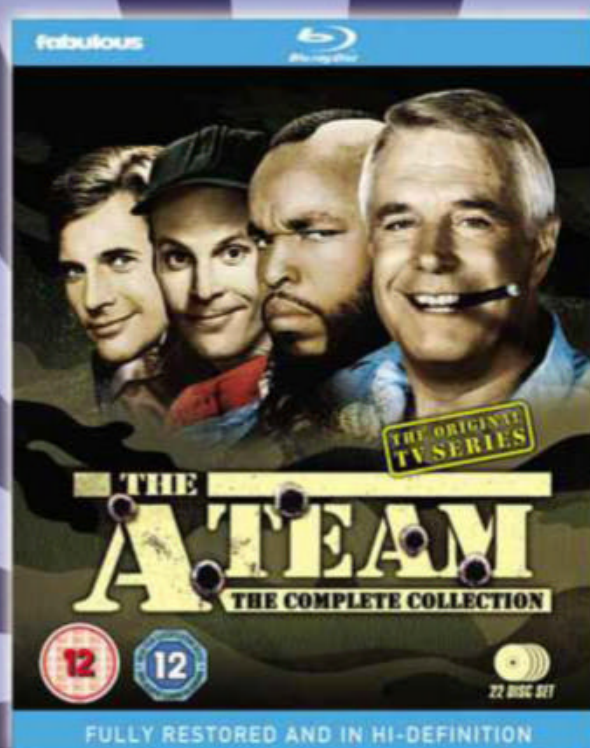
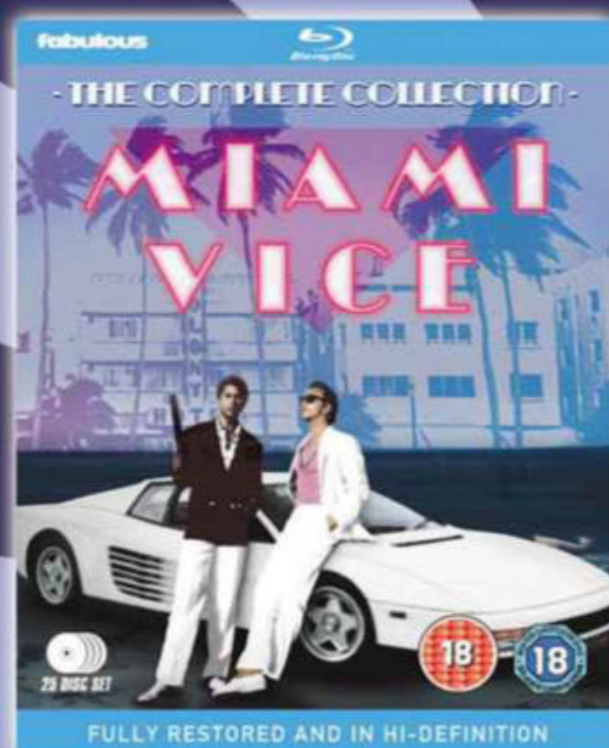
Strengths: Wide range of coverage, dealing with all the basics of ufology

Weaknesses: Perhaps too many episodes dealing with *The X-Files*...

Recommended Episodes: **Ep13: Punk Rock and UFOs – Cryptozoology Meets Anarchy;** **Ep16: The 1993 Fire in the Sky movie;** **Ep24: Dark Files and The Montauk Project;** **Ep29: The Black Eyed Kid Phenomenon;** **Ep31: Robbie Graham – Silver Screen Saucers;** **Ep35: Paul Cornell – Saucer Country UFO comic-book;** **Ep56: The True Story of Travis Walton**

Verdict: A great ufology podcast that’s easy to engage with.

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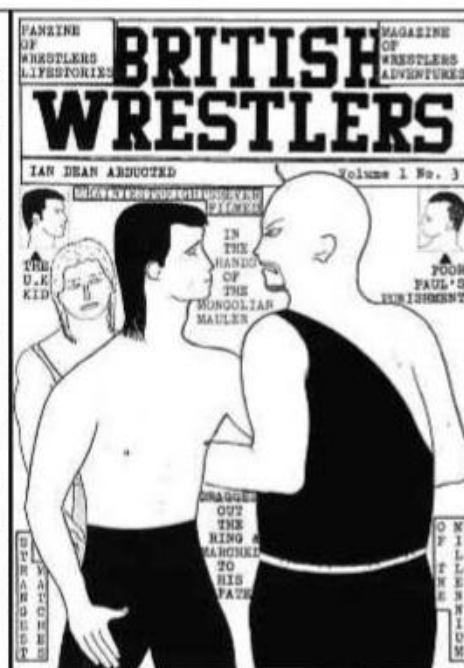


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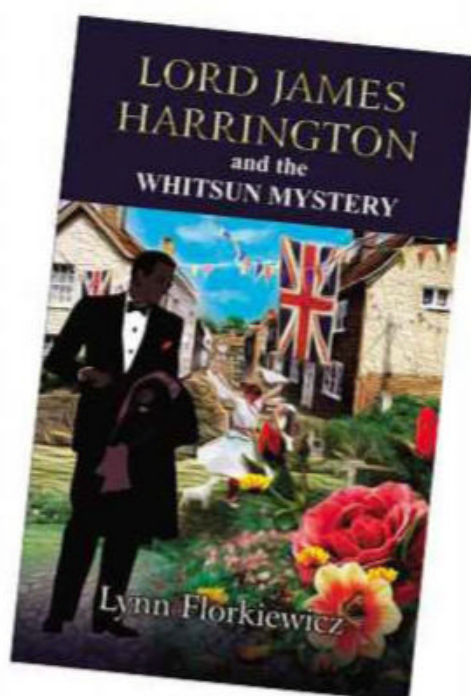
Lynn Florkiewicz's dream of being a writer began when she was just six years old, but it had to sit on the back-burner until, at the age of 45, she took a creative writing course with The Writers Bureau, and started out on a whole new adventure...

Avid reading as a child laid the foundation for Lynn's love of mystery and crime stories, and she always imagined that one day she'd write her own. When she grew up though, marriage and a promising career as a singer/songwriter on the British and American folk circuits gave her little time to pursue writing until, after a bout of particularly debilitating illness, she decided it was time to bring it to the fore.

Lynn enrolled on The Writers Bureau's Creative Writing Course back in 2001. She worked steadily through its 20 tutor-marked assignments, earning her course fees back from published work and getting placed/highly commended in several writing competitions along the way. Confidence thoroughly boosted, she then decided to try writing a children's adventure story - *The Quest for the Crystal Skulls*, of which, BBC Springwatch's Michaela Strachen said: 'There are many ways to create awareness about what we're doing to planet Earth, I found this an incredibly powerful and compelling one. I read it in one go.' (*The Quest for the Crystal Skulls* is available from Amazon and Penpress Partnership Book Publishing).

Inspired by a long-time love of cosy crime (Agatha Christie, Carola Dunn etc), Lynn's next move was to follow her

childhood dream and create her own murder-mystery series. And so it was that Lord James Harrington, country landowner, ex-racing driver and amateur sleuth, was born. When her first whodunit, *The Winter Mystery*, was launched on Kindle it received a plethora of five-star reviews from cosy crime fans, and that was all the encouragement Lynn needed to write more.



Five years on, and Lord James Harrington is a well-established character with his name on eight book covers. Lynn is already in the process of writing a ninth, with plans to release a new mystery every year. The books are all available from Amazon in Kindle, print and audio format, as well as from Lord Harrington's very own



Lynn Florkiewicz

website: www.lordjamesharrington.com.

'I've created a world that I adore and I love to slip into that imaginary community and meet up with my characters,' says Lynn. 'I am not a literary writer. I'm not here to change the world or make you think, I want to entertain people and, from the feedback I've received, I tick that box.'

Recently, Lord James Harrington was picked-up by Magna Publishing (part of Ulverscroft). They intend to release the whole series in audio and large print formats, and already, the American Audio File Magazine has awarded the first of these recordings with an Earphone Audio Award.

Lynn is just one of many Writers Bureau students who have found their way to publishing success. So if you harbour a dream to write, they can help. Their courses provide students with a professional writer as a personal tutor and cover all types of writing, as well as teaching the business side of being an author. To request free details, contact The Writers Bureau at: www.writersbureau.com or call – 0800 856 2008. Quote ATT18 You'll be glad you did!

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Foo fighters

I read David Clarke's article [FT372:32-39] on Churchill's Secret War, as ever, with interest, particularly the references to Foo fighters. These seemed to turn up in all US theatres of war, from Europe to Japan. I believe that the US connection is an important one. This particular 'UFO', quite possibly a form of St Elmo's Fire that forms on aircraft wings when there is a lot of particulate material in the atmosphere, took its 1940s name from the US cartoon strip *Smoky Stover*, whose catchphrase was "Where there's foo there's fire." The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes this as a "nonsense catchphrase"; but FOO is a military acronym for a Forward Observation Officer, responsible for directing fire onto enemy positions.

Nick Warren

Pinner, Middlesex

John Keel in Hollywood

I enjoyed Brian J Robb's "John Keel's adventures in Hollywood" [FT371:58-59], especially because of Keel's association with some favourite television shows of my childhood. A surprise for me was that Keel wrote for the seminal hidden camera show *Candid Camera*. I have a dim memory of a *Candid Camera* segment – aired around the time the original Mothman sightings were getting some national attention – which involved people's reaction to a Mothman-like creature (actually a man in a costume) on the roof of a building. Some questions come to mind: was the *Candid Camera* creature Keel's idea, fuelled by his interest in Mothman? Or did he not yet know of Mothman, but learned of it because of someone else's inspiration for this stunt? Or – dare I say it – were the original Mothman sightings nothing more than Keel or his colleagues testing out a hidden camera gag in West Virginia?

By the way, one should not take the "Hollywood" in the title of the article too literally, since much – if not all – of Keel's early TV work was for shows based in the New York area. For example, *The*

SIMULACRA CORNER



Metal face

Engineer Martin Wardle was filing down a metal plate when he noticed this spooky face. (The plate measures 79x48mm, and is 3mm thick.)

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 2409, London NW5 4NP or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.

Chuck McCann Show was a local broadcast in New York, and *Mack and Myer for Hire* was filmed in Hempstead, NY, in Nassau County on Long Island.

Bill Polaski

Mineola, New York

Inheritance

In reply to the correspondence thread about the seizure of witches' property, I've read that Giles Corey's famous dying words of "More weight!" were a way to ensure his property would remain unconfiscated and his sons could inherit it. If he had pleaded guilty, or pleaded innocent and been convicted, it would all have been taken by the state, but if he died without entering a plea at all, they had no legal right to do so.

Kate Eccles

Croydon, south London

Rite of passage

Regarding the sideline about a drugs binge party at a Travelodge

[‘Potato puzzle’, FT372:9]: the young man's lawyer is trying to get him off lightly, by saying that it is the mistake of an intelligent man to don women's clothes and fill a bathtub with potatoes while stoned unto oblivion. And I would like to say: Yes, of course, we've all been there! Who among us can honestly say that we've not cross-dressed while filling a bathtub with potatoes while stoned? It is a legitimate rite of passage. Someone phone Wade Davis.

James Wright

Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex

Temporary town

My parents were stable, no-nonsense kind of people, and the event related below really unnerved them. They had lived in the same Massachusetts town all their lives, so they knew the area like the back of their hands. One perfect summer day in 1980, they were driving to Rockport through Essex County along a secondary road that they knew intimately.

They were suddenly aware there were no other vehicles where, just a moment before, there had been a moderate flow of traffic. My mother said the road suddenly changed from "well worn" to new.

They found themselves in a town that they knew hadn't been there before. There was no one around, not even any stray animals. My mother felt it was all like some movie set waiting for the actors to appear. My father began to take side turnings at random, hoping to return to a familiar landscape. Eventually, they came to what seemed to be the town centre, with shops around a common... but the place was silent and deserted. While my father checked the shops, my mother, waiting in the parked car, became spooked by the unearthly stillness and silence. There was no birdsong. She called for my father and said: "Let's get the hell out of here."

They then came to a sign pointing the way to the 'lake' and 'carnival', and believe they had found an explanation: all the inhabitants must be at the carnival. But, even though it was the Fourth of July, both lake and carnival site were completely deserted. My father pulled away "like a bat out of hell", as he put it. As they left the town, my mother saw the sign for the town and attempted to look back to read it, but my father was driving too fast, so she couldn't get the name. Then suddenly, they found themselves back on the familiar road, with a normal stream of traffic.

A month later, I talked my father into going back down the road, but we couldn't find the town or the lake. We checked with the police and fire service; they confirmed there was no town or lake in the area. My parents never drove down that road again, and would take a longer way round. They told my wife and me: "We had the feeling if we ever returned there, we would never come back." They feared they would "vanish" with the town.

Frank T Hanahan

Lowell, Massachusetts

Editor's note: For a very similar episode, see "Epic forest" by Mrs JM Green [FT65:63].

LETTERS

Dark side of Persinger

I encountered Professor Persinger [obituary FT373:26] and his Neuroscience Research Group when I began teaching philosophy at Laurentian University, Ontario. Since many of Persinger's students were enrolled in my 'Philosophy of Psychology' course and I was a brash young, *Fortean Times*-reading professor, a number of his students confided in me as a kindred soul. Though research, discussion and friendships I began to get glimpses inside Persinger's lab (including a disappointing turn in the God Helmet) and saw some very dark shadows inside. These include:

1) Persinger had a very aggressive teaching style that saw him removed from several classes. Female students had particularly difficult experiences and both Laurentian University and the Ontario College of Psychologists received many complaints documenting this issue. "Voluminous" was how a Laurentian administrator described the number of complaints against him by female students.

2) The Neuroscience Research Group had a cult-like vibe and members had to attend weekly extra-curricula activities and meetings that continued beyond the academic year. I dubbed that group the 'Persingerites' for their unwavering devotion. Persinger brought out an admirable level of commitment from some

students, but I also saw that those who questioned him too much were harshly ostracised. Students who questioned the validity of his 'animal model'-based experimentation or his nonsensical use of quantum physics found that a cult leader who controlled your grades was a dangerous combination.

3) In 2001, Persinger's 25-year control of Laurentian's animal ethics board ceased when the Canadian Council on Animal Care demanded his removal. His experiments finally came under independent scrutiny, leading to an escalating struggle between Persinger and the ethics board that culminated in him being physically locked out of the labs and his students launching a series of failed lawsuits over the next decade. The suggestion in a *Fortean Times* article that religious fundamentalists were behind his lock-out is to reverse reality. It was the local scientific community (veterinarians and biologists) that were trying to stop the unscientific, unethical rat experiments that dominated Persinger's 1960s style of research. 'Animal models' of human disease are being phased out because they are unscientific.

4) Persinger's experiments were *primarily* predicated on injuring rats. In three years, 24 of 30 of the master research projects he supervised were predicated on severely injuring rats through poisoning, suffocating and mechanical impacts. I eventually realised these experiments were closer to 'killing a cat' as part of a gang initiation than anything scientific. A student needed to be 'blooded' as even non-Persingerites had to watch rats injected with seizure-inducing drugs or videos of rat fights within Persinger's classes.

5) The results of his experiments were dubious at best. The Neuroscience Research Group website boasted that they had accomplished the "complete abolishment [sic] of one of the most powerful mammalian properties: maternal behaviour [by

producing] hypersexual [rat] males with marked aggression" though acepromazine-induced seizures. This stuck me as akin to American psychologist Harry Harlow's dubious attempt to abolish maternal behaviour in chimpanzees through 'wire-mothers', 'pits of despair' and 'rape racks'.

Persinger also hypothesised that Jesus was put into a drug-induced coma to fake his death which came from experiments of restrained rats injected with reserpine which flatlined their body temperature and made the rats appear to have died only to revive (with massive brain damage) three days later. I suspect such 'experiments' will be seen belonging to the border realm of art and crime rather than science.

6) Persinger's philosophy was a blend of an absolutist belief in his own academic freedom mixed with a variety of New Age beliefs and then fused to a deeply reductive materialism (the Persingerite party line was that humans had no free will). I called them 'South Park Republicans' back then, which now fits snugly into the North American 'alt-right' movement. The 'alt-right' figurehead, Jordan Peterson, is yet another Ontario neuropsychologist turned cult-leader, who is very much cast from the Persinger mould. Their similar mixture of *fortean* subjects, self-promotion, and 'anti-political correctness', packed in a pseudo-science veneer seems perennially popular among young males.

Robert Beckett

Professor of Sociology, Laurentian University, Ontario, Canada

Bird-on-bird action

Regarding Trevor Millar's enquiry into finding disembodied pigeon wings on his rounds at work [FT370:76]: For some time now, my partner has endured the grisly sight of gulls attacking, killing and eating pigeons outside her office window in Woolwich [London]. Apparently, the preferred method is for the gull to get hold of the pigeon and bash it until dead before

dismembering the remains. It's unclear why the gulls would go to this effort given that there is ample food, easier to come by in Woolwich – perhaps they like their lunch fresh?

Gabriel Smith

Witham, Essex

In northern Japan around 2008, I watched at a harbour as gulls chased pigeons, forcing them to fly over the sea, and then seemingly attempting to force them down into the water. A local confirmed that it was common behaviour for the gulls there to force pigeons into the sea, where they drown and then are eaten by the gulls. Though not as spectacular, I have also seen gulls at Llandudno, Wales, attacking and eating an octopus that washed up onto some rocks. It seems that gulls will kill for their food when the opportunity presents itself.

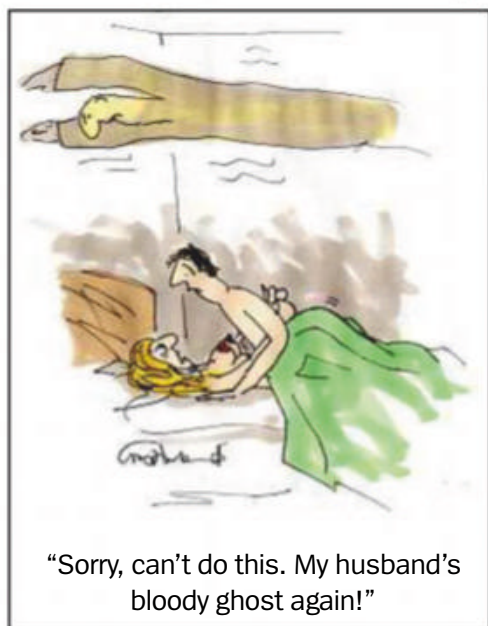
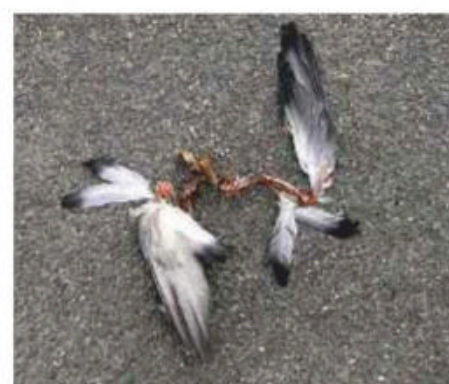
Richard Eccleston

By email

I have witnessed our local gull population devouring the remains of other birds, principally from the windows of our seafront B&B in Great Yarmouth. Our town is littered with the leftover pairs of wings during the gull breeding season, mostly pigeon, (see photo) but I have also seen starling remains. One day in summer 2017 I happened to witness a kill. I was at a third storey window in our house, level with the rooftop of the neighbouring two-storey house, being eyeballed by the resident gull. In a most laid-back manner, this gull stretched up its neck and plucked a passing swallow right out of the air and proceeded to turn it into the now familiar ghastly remains. I was astonished that such a nimble little bird could so easily be snared and consumed.

Polly Valentine

By email



TONY HUSBAND



I work at a large hospital in Glasgow and last year, on three separate occasions on my way to or from work, I noticed gulls eating the carcasses of dead pigeons. There are colonies of pigeons roosting in the old buildings, and I had wondered if the gulls were scavenging pigeons who had died of natural causes, or whether they had developed more predatory instincts. I've worked at the hospital for five years and had never noticed such behaviour before.

My questions were answered earlier this year when I witnessed a gull attacking a live, apparently healthy, pigeon in the car park. This was taking place on the ground, with the gull pecking and biting at the pigeon as it tried to break free. This was no minor squabble; it was obvious that the gull was trying to kill the pigeon. Things were touch and go for a moment, but eventually the pigeon made good its escape and left the disgruntled gull with only a beakfull of tail feathers for its trouble.

Scott Wilson
Glasgow

The following incident took place in Quimper, southern Brittany, in the summer of 2017. It was sunny and warm and the water in the River Odet was fairly low. The river at this point, running through the centre of the city, is bounded by steep stone/concrete sides with pavements on both sides. My attention was drawn to the river many feet below by a disturbance and along with several other people I witnessed a gull drowning a pigeon by holding it down, pecking and trampling it in the water off one of the rocks in mid-stream. I and the other onlookers tried in vain to effect a rescue by shouting and throwing various objects. The whole episode took no longer than three or four minutes. I assume the initial attack (which I did not see) took place in mid air, possibly in the canyon formed by the concrete banks of the river or higher up.

Rosalinda D' Silva
Morbihan, France

Editor's note: Thanks also to Kate Eccles and Michael Kenny for writing in on gull predation



Spiritual midden?

Malcolm Gaskill's article on witchcraft and magical objects [FT372:40-45] may have shed some light on a mysterious bundle of Victorian clothes and bits and pieces found hidden behind some rafters in my brother's house in Northam, north Devon. My brother and his wife bought the late 18th century house in the 1990s with a butcher's shop attached. The building had outhouses for animal slaughter, and had been a butcher's from early on. When they were creating a loft conversion they found a tightly wrapped bundle of what seemed to be the possessions of a young woman. It contained two whalebone corsets, two sets of darned stockings, two Sunday best hats, a black stole with beading, two cloth caps, an ink bottle and ripped up pieces of paper including a hymn sheet for a local Sunday school and other ephemera with local addresses. From one piece dated 1873 we gathered the bundle was from this era, and the clothing was consistent with that assumption. Also included in the bundle was a knotted piece of rope, possibly a love knot.

It was suggested that the bundle could have belonged to a serving girl (the clothing would have fitted a young woman or teenager of small stature) who lived in the attic space of the butchers. One dark idea was that the girl had been murdered by the butcher and added to



his pies à la Sweeney Todd, her worldly possessions left forgotten behind the rafters. The bundle seemed intentionally hidden behind a small beam, but for what reason? From what I gathered from Mr Gaskill's article, bundles of well-worn apparel, (including corsets) were hidden under floorboards and void spaces in houses as "spir-

itual middens". Could the bundle found in my brother's attic have been a ritual deposit – or was it just the secret hoard of a closet transvestite butcher?

Here are photos of some of the items. After photographing them, my brother returned the bundle to its attic hiding place.
Rob Shaw
Southsea, Hampshire

Circumstantial evidence

The Mythconception column on circumstantial evidence [FT370:27] requires some comment – not from a lawyer, but from a historian of the law. The classic statement on circumstantial evidence is Massachusetts Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw’s charge to the jury in the 1850 trial of John Webster for the murder of George Parkman. In that case there was no direct evidence that Webster had killed Parkman. In fact, there was no certainly identifiable body, only a few bones that may or may not have been Parkman’s, whose death could only be deduced from the fact that he had not been seen for several weeks; the whole case turned on circumstantial evidence. However, Shaw ruled that the lack of direct evidence did not prevent the jury from a finding of murder, if the circumstantial evidence convinced them; and as a result Webster was convicted and executed (see Simon Schama’s *Dead Certainties*, 1991.)

So in this case (and in others since) circumstantial evidence has on its own been enough to produce a conviction (whether a safe conviction is another matter). Still, as Henry David Thoreau remarked later in 1850, “In some cases circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.”

Martin Jenkins
London

Banged up for a century

Following on from Rob Gandy’s letter regarding the woman who had spent 70 years in hospital in 1981 [FT369:75]: I worked in a South London Psychiatric Hospital for 42 years, and in 2000 once had a patient aged 105 who had been in the hospital since she was five, because she was illegitimate.

Chris Cromer
Kingston-upon-Thames, south-west London

Anti-vaxers

As a middle-aged autistrix, I read the article on changelings [FT373:30-37] with great interest. There are many people today



Anarchist aliens

Eduardo Pons Prades (1920-2007) was a respected Spanish writer and historian, specialising in the 20th-century history of Spain. He fought in the Spanish Civil War (with counterfeit identification papers because he was just 16 years old) as a member of the anarchist CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo). When defeated, he was evacuated to France and there formed part of the Spanish anti-fascist resistance. After WWII, he settled in France and became an historian. In 1962 he returned to Spain and started the publishing house, Alfaguara.

In 1982, Pons Prades published *El mensaje de otros mundos – Siete horas a bordo de una nave espacial extraterrestre* (Message from other worlds – Seven hours on board an alien spaceship), where he relates that he was abducted by a UFO on 31 August 1981, while driving in the mountains on the frontier between France and Spain. It will surprise nobody to learn the perfectly human aliens shared his anarchist views. The publishing house warned him that his reputation would be damaged by publishing the book, but up to his death he insisted the incident was real.

Luis R González, Spain

who identify with the changelings and some of the stories in the article definitely suggest conditions we would recognise. For example, the babies who became little old people suggest progeria and some of the others sounded like they had metabolic disorders, but what struck me most were the similarities between the changeling stories and the current attitude of antivax parents (usually the mother) towards their autistic children.

The most obvious similarity is the way the mothers feel about their child being stolen: the baby was fine, then some external agency intervened and a different child was in its place. The antivax parents insist that their child was perfectly normal before the vaccine was given, and afterwards was completely different. They talk about modern medicine and doctors as if they were the evil fairy folk plotting to steal perfect babies

and replace them with autistic or otherwise neurodiverse children, for whatever reason – some even blend this into much bigger conspiracy theories such as the “gender agenda” and “white genocide”.

Essentially, children are still changelings, and the parents are still reacting in the same way; if less obviously abusive as the mediæval parents mentioned in the article, the same fears and reactions are at play in the minds of the parents. Some of the language used is even similar – the stock/fetch stories where the baby has been exchanged for a wooden replica definitely (and rather tragically) reminded me of parents describing what happened to their children after vaccination! There have been several modern murder cases where an autistic or learning-disabled person has been neglected to death by their parents or carers – and even Hans Asperger

himself sent some of his patients to the unit where such “euthanasia” was routine [FT369:26]. I wonder how many of the historical changelings, described as not thriving and dying, were actually hastened on their way.

The irony of course is that in reality, it is the *original* child who was imaginary and the apparent changeling who is the real one – a common grievance between autistic young adults and the worst of the “autism parents” is that the parents are too busy grieving for the imaginary child that they lost to appreciate the child they actually have. The adults report growing up feeling alienated from their families, with a constant sense that what they inherently are is inherently bad, and makes them different from the rest of the family. The dubious therapies currently favoured for autistic children particularly in America, such as applied behaviour analysis (ABA), focus on making the child overcome their very nature in order to present as normal and comply with “normal” society’s demands, reinforcing the message.

Where a child’s neurodiversity is accepted or even appreciated by their parents and friends, the language used is still often evocative of the changeling myth – even my rather puritan parents used to say I was “away with the fairies”. The employment prospects that existed for “high functioning” changelings were usually mystical or in some way Othered the person. Even now, the onus is on us to be less magical as we navigate the world we live in – our success as people is measured by how well we hide our fairy nature.

Zoë-Dawn Anderson
Bexleyheath, London

Druze beliefs

I was interested in the story about the three-year-old Druze who could speak some English [FT372:24]. The report said that reincarnation had been ruled out, but it is interesting to note that it was once thought that the Druze believed that they were reincarnated Englishmen. This is now in doubt. The faith is secretive, so it’s hard to know what the Druze believe – and you can’t join up like most other religions.

Kevan Hubbard
Oxford

IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts of strange experiences from *FT* readers

Canine sensitive

I was particularly interested in the Ghostwatch article on psychic pets [FT360:18] and wanted to throw my own story into the mix regarding a sensitive little dog I once owned. It was the late 1990s and I was in my late teens. I was at university in London and had moved into a flat in the old Bryant and May match factory in Bow, now named Bow Quarter. The original buildings had all been converted into loft-style apartments in the 1980s, and I was living in the Manhattan building with my then boyfriend. The flat itself was tiny with a small lounge and a 'bedroom' on the mezzanine floor above it. The whole site, while spectacular and beautiful, definitely had a creepy vibe and I didn't really like being in the flat on my own.

After a couple of months of living there, we decided to get a dog and brought home a very intelligent Westie puppy. From day one this dog was a nightmare, above and beyond the usual puppy shenanigans. I adored him, but he cried all night and if left alone for more than a few minutes he would start tearing up books, CDs, carpet – anything he could get his teeth on. It became impossible to leave him alone and on the very few occasions where we had no choice, we would come home to an utterly trashed flat and the dog would always be hiding behind the front door shaking from head to toe. He was clearly terrified but we just put it down to noises in the corridor as he always barked whenever someone walked past. He was fine and perfectly behaved whenever we took him anywhere, but I don't think I had realised at this point that he was clearly only distressed when he was at home. Not having much experience with puppies, we sought help from the vet and anyone who'd ever had a dog and tried everything they suggested, but to no avail.



We just presumed he had been born with some issues and tried to keep him calm and feeling safe at all times.

We'd had him for a couple of months when my boyfriend had to go away for work. It would be my first night alone in the flat and I was a bit spooked. I decided to sleep on the pull-out couch downstairs with the dog, as he couldn't manage the industrial metal stairs up to the mezzanine. I had literally just turned the light off and was getting settled for sleep when the dog suddenly went berserk and lost control of his bladder. I have never heard a noise like the one coming out of his mouth – just a weird shrieking howl that wouldn't stop. He was a bold and protective little dog and he immediately ran to the front door. I sat up and looked over the arm of the sofa, down to the door, and saw that there was a young man, probably in his mid-teens, clearly standing there. Being a big wimp, I'd left the hall light on for comfort so everything I could see was as clear as day. The dog was jumping up at him and barking like crazy. I immediately thought someone had broken in, but in the same instant that I remembered the door was securely locked and I was in a gated community, I noticed that the boy was wearing old

“The little dog would be hiding behind the front door, shaking from head to toe”

fashioned clothes – long socks, short trousers, waistcoat and a flat cap. I then noticed that the dog was jumping up at him and falling straight through his legs! This was clearly not a solid, living person. The boy was clearly aware of the dog and was scared. He was looking around wildly and sort of jumping from foot to foot as if he was panicking and didn't know what to do. The next thing he just walked through the wall into the next-door flat and it was over. I grabbed the puppy, left the mess and hid under the covers for the rest of the night. I was terrified!

We only had a six-month lease so it wasn't long before we moved out. We were dreading how the dog would cope with the change of a new flat and routine, but he was immediately fine. It was like he was a completely different dog. He never once tore up the flat and would happily stay at home alone, contented to just lie around sleeping. He died of

cancer when he was 10 years old and although he never again alerted me to the presence of a ghost in such a spectacular way, he was clearly a special and sensitive dog. He would often bark at things that weren't visibly there and once started whimpering and cowering for no reason as if someone was shouting at him. He was also extremely protective and although he was small, he had a big presence that definitely came in handy, what with me being a young woman out walking the dog late at night. He saved me from more than one dangerous situation in his time and I adored him and miss him every day.

Are there any readers who live/have lived in Bow Quarter and have any ghostly stories to share?

Sara Bateman
By email

Disembodied arm

Rob Gandy in 'The Haunting of David Barton' [FT371:40-44] mentions Alan Murdie's statement that encounters with disembodied hands or arms are rare. Earlier this year I had gone into the Traveller's Tavern near Victoria Coach Station. I was using their toilet and was at a sink washing my hands. The mirrors above the sink reflected part of the room including some other sinks. I noticed an arm in the sleeve of a white jacket at one of these sinks reflected in the mirror in front of me. It seemed to be splashing water into its owner's unseen face. I mused The sleeve seemed to belong to a rather old fashioned jacket such as would have been worn by Peter Wyngarde in *Department S*. I thought nothing of this until I turned to leave the room. The whole place was empty, the owner of the arm nowhere to be seen. He would have had to pass me to get to the door – and all the cubicles were open and empty.

Richard Freeman
Centre for Fortean Zoology, Exeter

Fortean Traveller



113. The Winter Watch

ROB GANDY celebrates a seasonal mash-up of ancient Roman and mediæval winter festivals on the streets of modern-day Chester

Chester is one of England's oldest cities. Founded as a fort by the Romans in the AD 70s, it has the most complete city walls in Britain, and a Roman amphitheatre. There is little doubt that its early inhabitants would therefore have celebrated Saturnalia, a seven-day festival of light leading to the winter solstice, which was a time for feasting, goodwill, generosity to the poor, the exchange of gifts and the decoration of trees. It survived well beyond the first Christian emperors, before arguably being assimilated into Christmas festivities.

Chester also has a mediæval tradition of a Midsummer Watch and a Winter Watch, dating from the 15th century. The Midsummer Watch involved a parade renowned throughout the country and represented pageantry on a grand scale. By contrast, the Winter Watch had a particularly serious purpose: records in the British Library describe how 16 tenants of the city were bound to watch the city for three nights each year – Christmas Eve, Christmas Day



and St Stephen's Day – because these were the periods when festivals were taking place and disorder could threaten the peace. The Winter Watch, in effect, acted as a police force to control revellers, and the responsibility and financial burden fell on the local Guilds. The custom was that the civic leaders would hand over the keys of the city to the Watch after they processed around Chester to ensure it was secure. There would then follow a banquet and celebration of Christmas, in the knowledge that the city was safe. Both Watches continued into the 17th century, when it seems Puritanism triumphed.

With such a history of festivities and parades, it is little surprise that Chester's local council decided to revive the Midsummer and Winter Watch parades in the 1990s, partly to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the former, and partly to act as attractions to generate tourist income. Whilst the recreated Midsummer Watch reflected details from the city archives, it was decided to make the Winter Watch more of a fun parade. It takes place twice in the lead up to Christmas, but for one of these it combines with a Saturnalia procession of soldiers from the Deva Vitrix 20th Legion (Leg XX v.v.) to make for a particularly spectacular evening. So armed with my travel pass, I headed into town on a cold, wet December evening, to see what was afoot!

The Roman soldiers were actually the excellent local Roman Tours re-enactment display team who use authentic clothing and equipment, supported by their 6th Legion friends from York. The Legion gathered outside the Grosvenor Museum before illuminating the streets with their torches, marching past the amphitheatre and turning into Eastgate Street, under the famous clock, to the steps

ABOVE: Skeletal giants on parade.

LEFT: Emperor Domitian, last seen somewhere near Debenhams.



DONALD JUDGE / FLICKR / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: Unicorns, dragons and all sorts of other creatures of myth and legend are paraded through Chester's streets.

of the unique Chester Rows outside, er, Debenhams. Here, 'Emperor Domitian' addressed the crowd with a grand speech about Saturnalia and some bloodcurdling stuff such as: "I am the axe that thuds into your skull. I am the accuser, judge and executioner!" Of course, everyone cheered. He then formally unleashed the Lord of Misrule.

In addition, the Legion's Centurion gave a speech with more details about Saturnalia, such as its relaxed dress codes and inversion of normal social roles, with masters and slaves swapping clothes. He also talked about the god Mithras – who was variously described as 'the Way', 'the Truth', 'the Light', 'the Life', 'the Word', 'the Son of God', and 'the Good Shepherd', and was born of a virgin; – before asking: "Does this remind you of anybody?"

There followed a ceremonial lighting of four candles (No, not fork 'andles!), representing the four cardinal points of the compass and symbolising the quest for knowledge and truth, before the soldiers re-formed into lines and resumed their torch-lit procession to the Town Hall Square, followed by the eager crowd. It was there that they joined with the Winter Watch.

The Winter Parade had a distinct carnival atmosphere, led as it was by Karamba

Giants were a central feature of mediæval processions

Samba, the 'ghost band', with its skeletal-faced drummers. They were followed by a wide variety of magical and festive characters: the Lord of Misrule; Angels; Devils; Dragons; Ice Queens; Jack Frost; Kings riding camels; skeletons, and characters with Raven heads. All along the line there were lanterns of every shape and size, including stars and moons. The parade also maintained the mediæval tradition of including giant effigies; these modern incarnations were the Lord of Misrule, Father Christmas, a snowman, winged Ravens, and 12ft (3.6m) high skeletons wearing top hats held aloft. And finally, bringing up the rear was the Deva Vitrix 20th Legion carrying their torches. They were certainly earning their cups of *posca*.

The parade started from Chester Town Hall Square, passing through the Christmas Market and past Chester Cathedral on to St Werburgh Street, before turning right into Eastgate Street, where it paused

for the benefit of the crowds. It then set forth to Bridge Street, where it turned and came back to Chester Cross before heading back to the Town Hall Square via Northgate Street. When the parade finished, the drumming band continued to entertain everyone for some time.

It was great to see so many children and youngsters, not only watching the parade, but also actively participating. This is the way to build new 'old' traditions.

Chester is only one place where old customs and practices have been rekindled, recreated or reinvented, and such initiatives should be applauded; without them, we would be living in a fairly drab world. Giants are always a very popular attraction, with French puppeteers Royal De Luxe delivering fantastic events across the globe, and delighting enormous crowds in nearby Liverpool in both 2012 and 2014. The inclusion of several giants in Chester's modern Winter Watch reflects their centrality to the mediæval processions, where the giants were enormous structures made of buckram and pasteboard, carried by two or more men. Giants were also common in Tudor pageantry and across 16th century Europe. However, Chester was unique because it paraded a whole family of giants: a father, a mother

and two giant daughters. In addition, there were fantastic outsized beasts, which included a camel, a dragon, an elephant, and a unicorn. Apparently, it was the custom for the dragon to be beaten by six naked boys, but this practice was banned in the late 16th century. The giants were accompanied by fools, guildsmen, hobbyhorses, musicians, and children dressed as angels, goblins and green men. The addition of giant ravens to the cast of characters is a recent one, only dating back to 2002. This was in recognition of the ravens that nested in Chester's Town Hall in 1996, the first time these huge birds had nested on a building in England since the 15th century, ensuring their place in ornithological history.

If you're looking for somewhere to do some Christmas shopping and you fancy some fun with a forteen twist, you can do no better than to attend the next Saturnalia and Winter Watch parades in Chester on 6 and 13 December.

RESOURCES

www.midsummerwatch.co.uk/history/; www.romantoursuk.com/; www.visitchester.com/; www.royal-de-luxe.com/en/pictures-wall/

♦ **ROB GANDY** is a visiting professor at the Liverpool Business School, John Moores University and a regular contributor to FT.

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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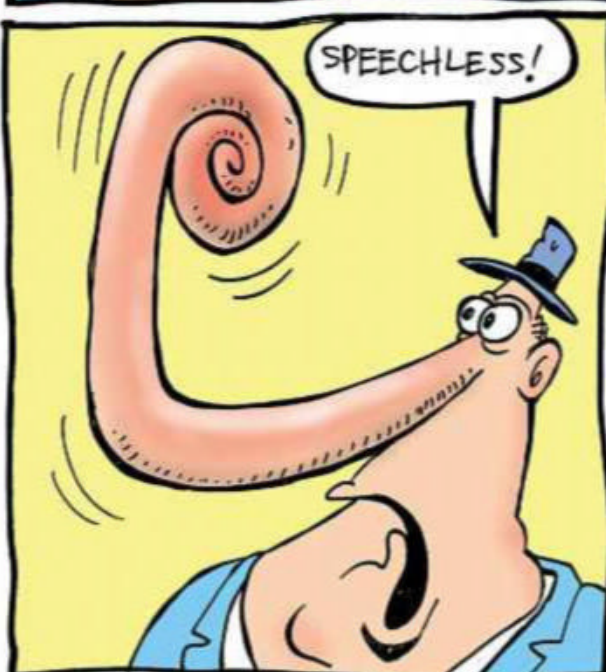
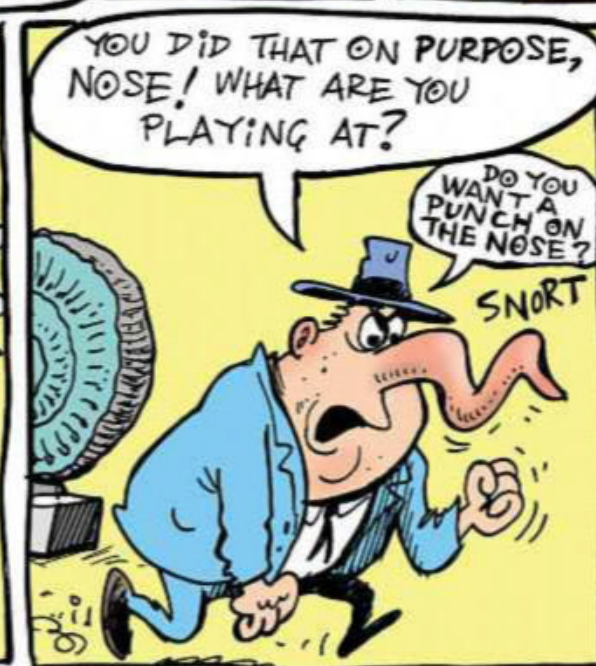
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ON SALE 4 JAN 2019

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

Losing the will to live is deadly, according to Dr John Leach of the University of Portsmouth. He is the first to study "psychogenic death" widely and to define its five stages. Sometimes termed "give-up-itis", it usually follows an emotional shock from which a person thinks there is no mental escape, which makes them dangerously apathetic about their own existence. If not stopped, death may occur three weeks after the first stage of withdrawal, but can happen even sooner. Dr Leach cites the case of a Soviet prisoner who, after serving a 10-year sentence, was told the term had been prolonged indefinitely. He died the same day "for no visible reason". The condition was highlighted in the 1950s by US Army medical officers after soldiers died without any obvious cause during the Korean War.

Psychogenic death (aka voodoo death) was first defined in 1942 by Harvard psychologist Walter Cannon, who noticed that it could often be triggered by the fear of supernatural consequences of breaking taboos. Cannon also named the "flight or fight" response, and believed that the flight response took over in voodoo death, but the sufferer couldn't act on it, leading to a fatal chain of events.

"Severe trauma might trigger some people's anterior cingulate circuit to malfunction," said Dr Leach. "Motivation is essential for coping with life. Psychogenic death is real. It isn't suicide and it isn't linked to depression." By reviewing case reports from concentration camp inmates and shipwreck survivors, he found that the first stage is social withdrawal in which sufferers exhibit lack of emotion, listlessness and indifference, and become self-absorbed. Next, a deep apathy sets in where a person no longer cares about self-preservation and sinks into a deep demoralising apathy. The third phase is "aboulia", in which people stop speaking and give up eating and washing, which leads to stage four, psychic akinesia, where they no longer feel even extreme pain. Stage five is death.

Dr Leach believes the process can be halted by physical activity, or an individual regaining some control over their life, both of which can trigger the release of feel-good dopamine. The research was published in the journal *Medical Hypothesis*. Many scientists are sceptical of psychogenic death as a recognisable syndrome. *D.Telegraph*, *D.Mail*, 28 Sept 2018.

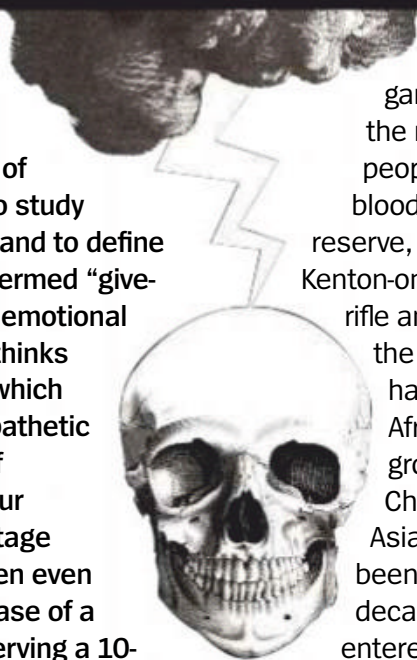
Suspected rhino poachers were mauled to death and eaten by lions on a South African

game reserve. Rangers discovered the remains of two, possibly three, people – a head and a number of bloodied body parts – in the Sibuya reserve, near the south-east town of Kenton-on-Sea, along with a high-powered rifle and an axe. A helicopter searched the area for more poachers. There has been a rise in poaching in Africa in recent years, to feed growing demand for rhino horn in China, Vietnam and elsewhere in Asia. More than 7,000 rhinos have been killed in South Africa in the past decade. The suspected poachers entered the reserve late on 1 July or early the next morning. "They strayed into a pride of lions – it's a big pride so they didn't have too much time," said Nick Fox, 60, owner of the game reserve. "We're not sure how many there were – there's not much left of them." However, three empty pairs of shoes suggested three hunters had been consumed. Several lions had to be tranquillised before the remains could be recovered. *BBC News*; *mirror.co.uk*, 5 July 2018.

British backpacker Harry Evans, 23, died after being attacked by a black ring sea snake in Australia. He was bitten on the thumb while pulling up a net on a fishing trawler off Groote Eylandt, an island off the northern coast, on 4 October. He told colleagues he felt fine, but then began to drift in and out of consciousness. The crew tried to revive him, but he died about an hour later. His mother, from Poole in Dorset, said he had called her the day before he died: "He said he was having the time of his life." It is believed to be the first recorded death from a sea snake in Australia. *Sun*, *D.Mirror*, 6 Oct; *D.Telegraph*, 8 Oct 2018.

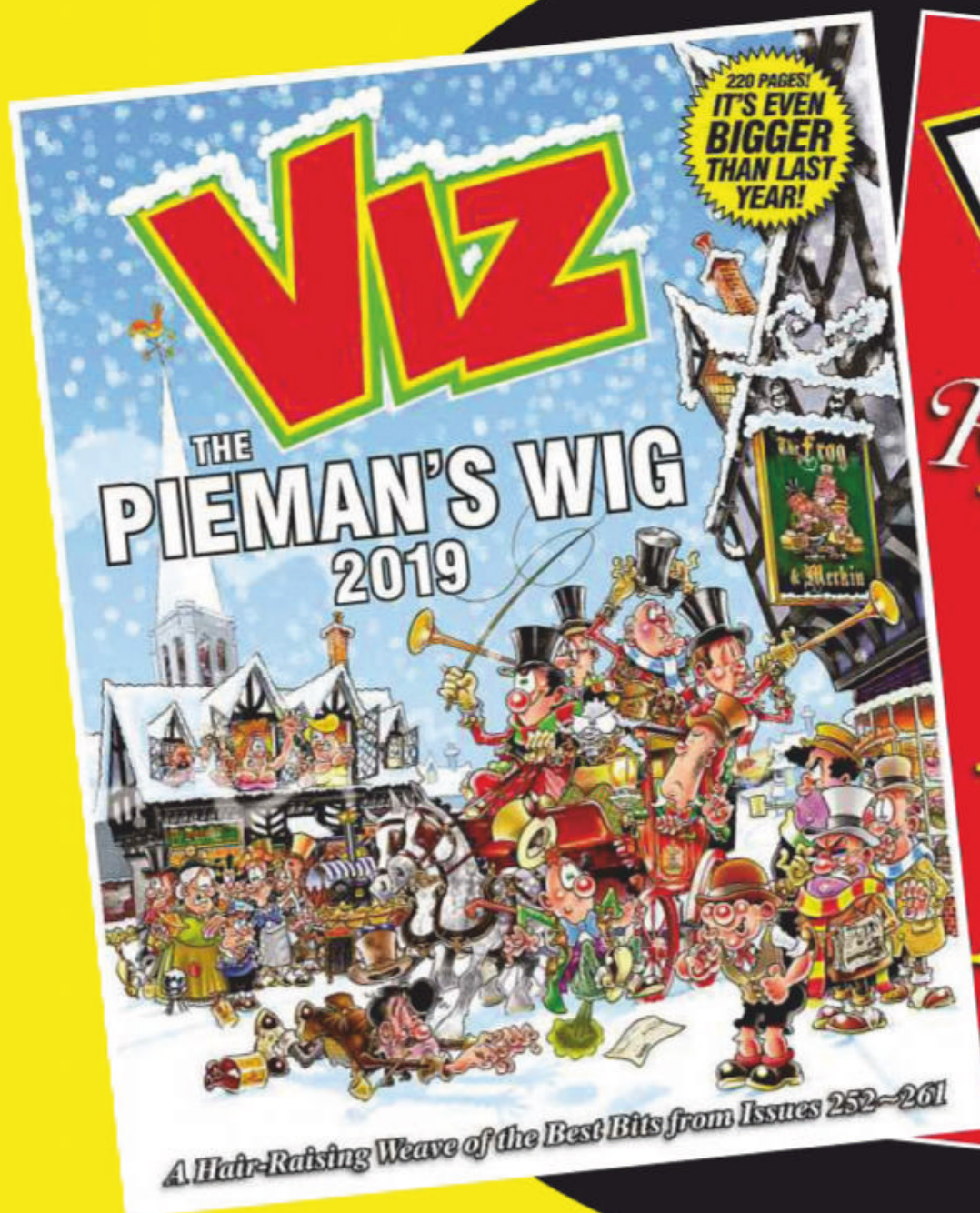
Marco Tosti, 20, a hunter, was killed by a companion on 20 October as they combed the mountains in search of prey near Santa Rufina, about 40 miles (64km) north of Rome. Tosti was shot in the abdomen when his 70-year-old friend heard a noise, mistook him for a wild boar and fired at him. He later died in hospital. It was the third hunting tragedy in Italy in a month. A 56-year-old hunter died near Velletri, south of Rome, in mid-October and Nathan Labolani, 18, was killed in northern Italy at the end of September. *D.Telegraph*, 22 Oct 2018.

A 26-year-old man was killed by an AA battery charger, which exploded and fired shrapnel into his chest. The incident took place in an office building in Hamburg's St Pauli district. *D.Telegraph*, 24 Aug 2018.



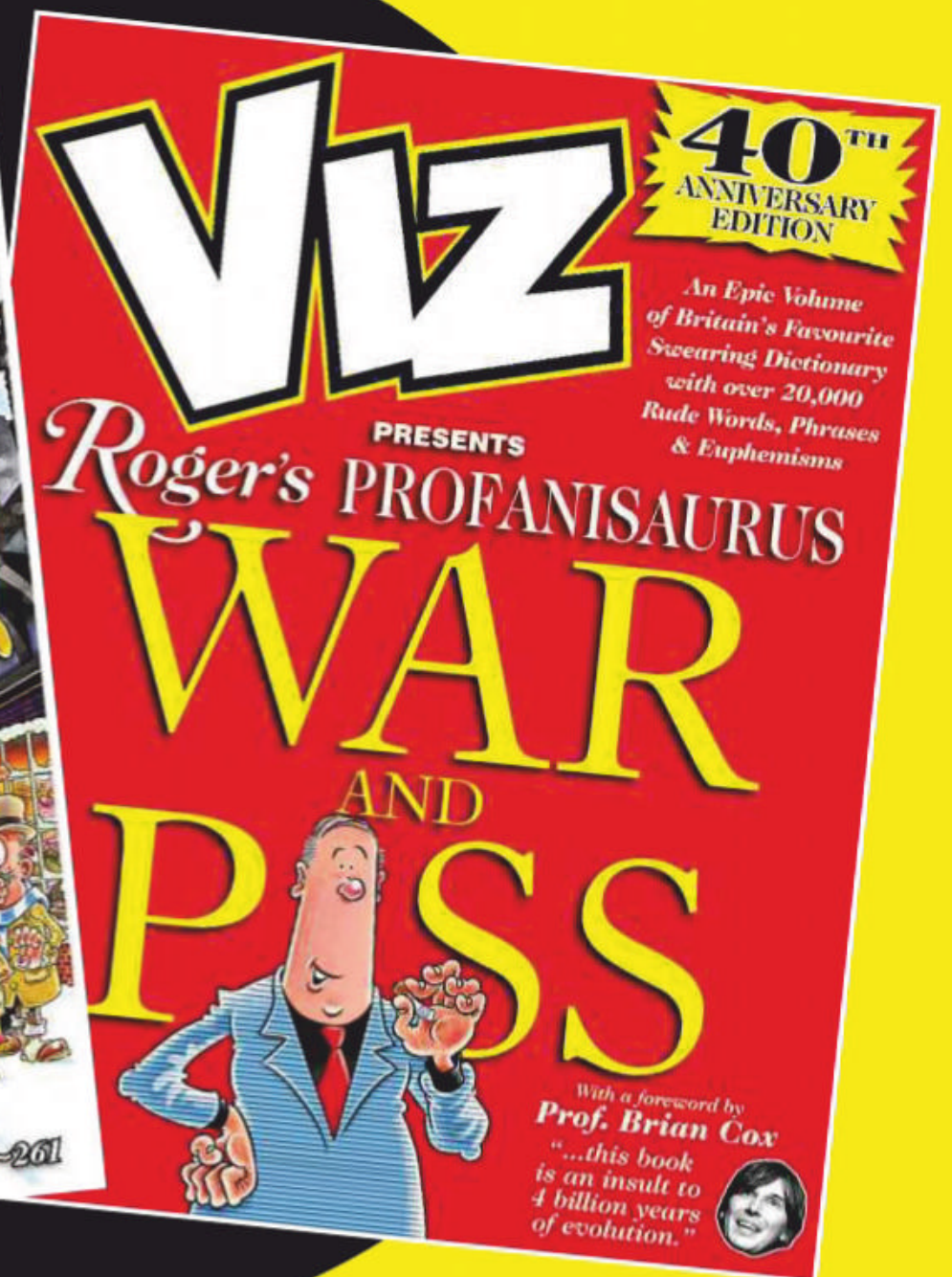


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